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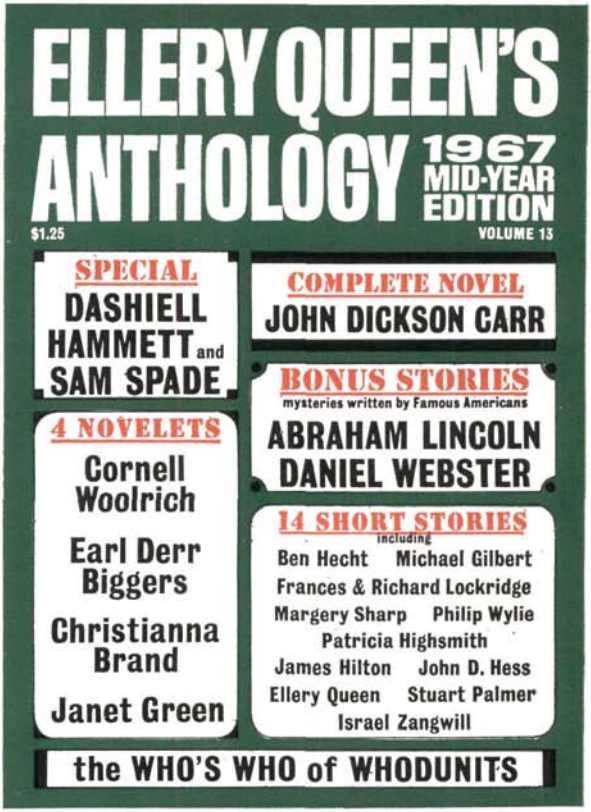

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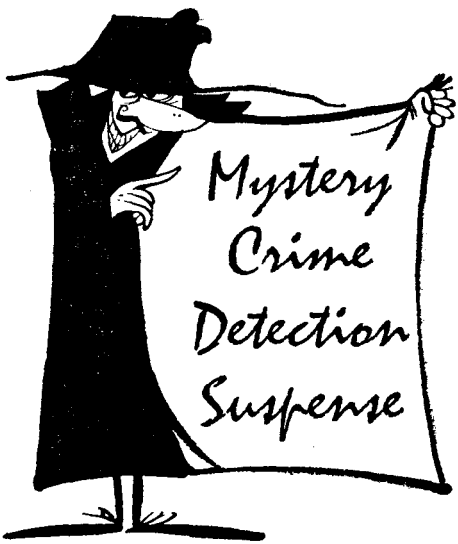

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Join a Crimson Coach Luxury Tour in Southern England, with the mixed company likely to be present on such a summer holiday trip. Join Gilbert Langham, crime writer, researching material for his fifth detective novel—and finding himself plump in the middle of a baffling mystery . . . Happy reading!

THE CRIMSON COACH MURDERS

by JULIAN SYMONS

"IT'S RATHER STEEP, THIS PATH," SAID Miss Penny. "And a little bit slippery."

"You'll be all right," said her companion reassuringly. "Just hold on to the rail."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I haven't enjoyed myself so much for years. It was such a wonderful idea, the coach tour. Everybody seems so nice. And the weather."

Miss Penny looked up, a little old birdlike woman wearing a mauve silk frock, a hat with a great deal of fruit on it, and dazzlingly ornamental dark glasses.

The cliff rose up, as it seemed, a long way above her, overhanging so that the top was invisible. She saw sky and sea that, through her glasses, was not dazzling but muted blue. She saw the face of her companion, smiling. And below, quite near now, was a rocky cove hol-

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lowed out of the cliff, with little pools between the rocks.

"Rather a sharp turn," said her companion. A hand was laid on her arm, on the arm that held the handrail.

"This is really a great adventure," Miss Penny said gaily.

Quite gently the hand lifted her arm from the rail, and a knee pushed her less gently in the back. Miss Penny fell helter-skelter down the last few steps, squawking like a duck. She caught her head nastily on a rock, and before she could get up, before she really knew what was happening at all, hard hands gripped her shoulders and forced her resistlessly down so that her face touched the salt and slimy water in one of the pools.

Miss Penny struggled then, and tried to speak, but when she opened her mouth, water filled it. She did not struggle for long. It was the end of her great adventure.

Her hat floated on the pool, like a toy boat laden with cherries and strawberries. Her body lay face down in the water.

There was one more thing to do, and her companion did it. The time was just after six o'clock in the evening . . .

The Crimson Coach Luxury Tour party sat in the lounge of the Barbeck Hotel and waited for dinner. The Barbeck was not the best hotel in Eastbourne, but it justified well enough, Gilbert Langham thought, the brochure's claim: *'The hotels specially selected by our experts offer THE BEST OF EVERYTHING—food prepared by Continental chefs, smiling service, and rooms with a view of the sea.'* The room was comfortable, the service was quick, and there were pleasant smells coming from the dining room.

But back to duty. This was really a piece of field research for Gil Langham, whose fifth detective novel was to be about a murder committed on a coach tour in Southern England. With part of a plot sketched out he found himself at a loss to imagine what sort of people actually went on such a tour. What could be simpler than to go on one himself, and find out?

He took a small black notebook from his pocket and studied what he had already written, after the trip down from London with its break for a "surprise" lunch (which proved to be a picnic), and a visit to Arundel Castle.

William and Mary Blake. Married couple. Husband much older than wife. Wandered off on their own this afternoon.

Gil Langham looked at them now, sitting on a window seat with hands touching, and wondered if they were honeymooners.

At a table nearby sat the handsome gray-haired old man named Antrobus, and on a sofa Mrs. Elaine Williams lay back studying her

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blood-red nails and looking bored. He read what he had written.

Mr. Antrobus. Retired businessman? Made a fuss when we stopped for drinks, said he'd been charged twopence too much for tomato juice. But looks prosperous. Doesn't seem really to be enjoying himself.

Elaine Williams. Merry Widow spider? Looking for husband-fly to walk into her parlor?

A hand was placed on his shoulder, and a voice boomed in his ear. "Hello, hello! This won't do. Settling down to work while you're on holiday isn't allowed. Have a drink, old man."

Tompkins was fortyish, almost bald, and obviously destined for the part of bore of the tour. But very likely his book would have a bore in it, Gilbert Langham thought with a mental sigh as he said that he would like a drink. As they passed the Merry Widow she looked up. Her eyes telegraphed an invitation which Langham ignored.

"Not a bad looker, that," Tompkins said when they had their whiskies at the bar. "Did you notice her giving me the eye? But I always say, take it easy. You don't want to start anything you can't finish on a holiday like this."

"You've been on tours like this before?"

"I get around," Tompkins said "Now, don't think I'm nosey, old man, but I always flatter myself I can spot a man's occupation. You're a schoolmaster, right?"

Gilbert had been prepared for this. "No. I'm a journalist, a free lance."

"Looking for copy, eh? Writing us up?"

"Of course not!" But he felt uncomfortable. The look in Tompkins' eye had been remarkably shrewd. He might be a bore, but he was far from a fool.

A young man came into the lounge, a young man with a tanned face, dark hair carefully parted, and teeth that showed dazzlingly white when he smiled. This was Jerry Benton, the tour guide, who seemed to Gilbert Langham rather too much of a good thing. One couldn't make him a murderer in a story because it would be too obvious, but all the same—

"Don't like that chap," Tompkins said, cutting into and confirming his thoughts. "Don't trust him. 'Call me Jerry,' he says. I'll call him—" And he made a coarse joke.

Benton was going round from table to table, talking to all the members of the party, many of whom Gilbert Langham did not know. He chatted for a minute with Mr. Antrobus and then stopped beside the Merry Widow. They came over to the bar together. Benton performed introductions in a low, pleasant voice.

"There is a dance this evening at the Winter Garden. For those on the tour there is no charge."

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"Don't dance," Tompkins snapped.

"And a concert at the Pavilion. Again no charge. Tomorrow morning at ten thirty there is a mystery tour that will last the morning."

"Same old South Downs mystery, I suppose," Tompkins said.

Benton was imperturbable. "Those who wish to stay here may, of course, do so. We leave the hotel after lunch."

The Merry Widow smiled at him. "Are you going to the dance?"

Benton smiled back. "Of course!"

The dinner gong sounded, and at the same moment the manager came into the lounge with a tall, hard-faced man wearing a blue serge suit. They came up to Benton together.

"Mr. Benton?" the man in the blue suit said. "My name is Lake. Detective-Superintendent Lake."

For a moment there seemed to be a break in Benton's perfect composure, then his smile was in place again. "Yes, Superintendent. What can I do for you?"

"You have a Miss Penny in your coach party?"

"That's right. But she's not here at the moment. She is a little late for dinner."

"Miss Penny won't want dinner. She's dead."

Mrs. Williams gave a little scream.

Tompkins said, "An accident?"

"It seems that she fell down by some rocks, caught her head, and drowned in a pool." The Superintendent spoke with deliberate slowness. "But there's one odd thing. A book, with all the pages torn out, was by her side. The pages were scattered around."

"What was the book?" Gil Langham asked.

Superintendent Lake stared at him. "*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.*"

Langham stared, and said with a gulp when asked his occupation, "I write detective stories."

A sergeant in the corner of the manager's office, where this interrogation was taking place, snorted slightly. Gilbert Langham gulped again, and decided that he might as well go on. "I'm here to get background material for a new book."

"You've been very successful." With the same grim sarcasm Lake said, "Using your no doubt exceptional faculties of observation, have you noticed anything odd on this coach tour so far?"

"I can't think of anything."

"Or about Miss Penny?"

Miss Penny, Miss Penny? They had hardly spoken. She was a face to him, no more than that—an old face inquisitive and perhaps vain, topped by a ridiculous hat. "I remember the fruit on her hat more than the face under it. Wasn't it an accident, then, Superintendent?"

"This is a queer business." Lake stared hard at him. "A crime writer might have thought it up." Langham flinched. "This little old woman goes off for a walk, climbs down

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some steps, slips—we can see the mark—falls, hits her head, and drowns in a pool of water. That's the way it looks. I think we might accept it as an accident.

"But then someone—someone, Mr. Langham—tears the pages out of a famous detective book, throws them all over the place, and leaves the gutted book by her body. If she was murdered, why should the murderer do that, after arranging things to look like a neat little accident? Or why should anybody else do it? This is the kind of thing that should appeal to a writer of crime stories."

The way in which these last words were spoken made Gilbert Langham gulp again. "Have you found out anything about Miss Penny? I mean, why should anybody want to kill her?"

The sergeant in the corner said, "Evelyn Penny. Spinster. Lived at 18 Cotes Avenue, Turnham Green, London. Told other members of party that she had retired from work in drapery store, had small private income, went away somewhere every year. Did not appear to know anyone else in coach party."

"And her movements, Sergeant?"

"Coach arrived Barbeck Hotel, Eastbourne, about three thirty. Miss Penny had tea in lounge, then said she was going for a stroll. Was seen by Mr. Tompkins on front, later by Mr. and Mrs. Blake having photograph taken at the Nu-Stile-Picksher stall also on the front. This was about four forty-five. Not seen afterwards until discovery of body just before seven o'clock. Purse appeared not to have been touched and no sign of bodily violence."

"There's nothing to connect this with the coach," the Superintendent said. "But still, I'd like to keep what you might call an unofficial sort of an eye on your party. With your powers of observation, Mr. Langham, you could be a help to us in that way if you cared to."

The Superintendent smiled now. It made the request sound like an order.

"All right. But I don't really see what you want me to do."

"Just keep your eyes and ears open. We'll get in touch with you again in a day or two."

Dinner was late, but it could not be said that Miss Penny's death cast a shadow over the coach party. Rather it provided a ready-made subject of conversation which could be added to the weather and the food. Gilbert Langham sat afterward at a table with the Blakes and listened to them talking about it.

"Honestly, you know, Mr. Langham, I don't think the poor thing was quite all there," Mary Blake said. "I mean, we saw her having her photograph taken on the parade by those people who give away prizes every day—"

"Nu-Stile-Pickshers," her husband said. He was a hearty, tweed-

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jacketed, pipe-smoking man in his early thirties, perhaps ten years older than his birdlike wife. "Advertising stunt, you know. As a matter of fact, we had our own pictures taken."

"But no luck with a prize," Mary Blake said. "Anyway, when the young man asked if she wanted her picture taken, she was primping and blushing like a girl of fifteen."

Mr. Blake puffed at his pipe, rustled the evening paper. "I reckon some man got hold of her—sex maniac, probably."

"But Bill," his wife said with ghoulish eagerness, "there wasn't—I mean, she wasn't *interfered with,* was she?"

Bill Blake was having trouble with his pipe. He tapped out the dottle in an ashtray. "The Superintendent didn't say so. If we're going to this dance, my girl, you ought to get ready."

Mary Blake excused herself. Her husband began to read the paper.

Gilbert Langham also went to the dance at the Winter Garden. The unattached women in the party, he saw, were beginning to pair up with men. He found himself asking the Merry Widow to dance. They talked, as seemed inevitable, about Miss Penny.

"I'm so glad it hasn't been allowed to spoil the tour," she said. "Jerry has been simply marvelous about it. You know how silly people are—they get worried; but Jerry's told them all it was just an accident."

"That was good of him."

"Yes, wasn't it? But he must have had a lot of experience in handling awkward situations. He was some sort of courier in the Middle East at one time. And then he was a smuggler."

"Really? What did he smuggle, Mrs. Williams?"

"My name's Elaine." She came close to him. The bloom of youth, he saw, had been replaced by the enamel of middle age, but she was still an attractive woman. She whispered in his ear, "Diamonds."

He wanted to ask why, if Jerry Benton was a diamond smuggler, he had this humble job of guide to a coach party, but after all it was none of his businses if the guide like to tell fairy stories to impressionable women. Instead he said, "Who was particularly worried about Miss Penny?"

"That's a funny thing. It was the man who keeps himself so much to himself. Mr. Antrobus."

Mr. Antrobus, gray-haired and really remarkably handsome, sat in the lounge drinking coffee when the party from the Winter Garden returned, gay and chattering. Tompkins also was in the lounge. He made a beeline for Gilbert Langham.

"I've had a word with the Super and told him my theory about the Penny murder—"

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Jerry Benton interrupted him. "It was an accident. And anyway it's rather a gloomy subject, old man. I think it should be declared closed."

Tompkins glared at him. "It's a free country. This is my theory. That old girl, Miss Penny, had somehow got the wrong side of a chap who's a maniac about books, see. And this chap did for her, and then left the book by her side. What you might call symbolism."

There was a clatter from the other side of the lounge. Mr. Antrobus had knocked his coffee cup to the floor. He did not pick it up, but slowly rose and walked over to the lift.

"Good night," Tompkins said cheerfully.

Mr. Antrobus did not reply.

A man who is tired of Brighton is tired of life, Gilbert Langham said to himself, bringing Dr. Johnson up to date. He walked from the lawns of Hove to the Palace Pier in a trance of pleasure, leaving the promenade as he passed the Metropole to walk down beside the beach.

Here children shrieked happily; their parents bought tea trays and sticky cakes; young men in vivid shirts left the sunlight to play earnestly at pinball machines in the amusement arcades.

Behind this popular, vulgar Brighton lay the solid hotels full of money, and behind them the appropriately artificial glamor of the Prince Regent's onion domes. He stopped before a little hut that said *Nu-Stile-Pickshers.* Underneath was a sign in dashing scarlet calligraphy: *'Hav Yore Foto Takn and Win Wun of Our Munny Prizes.'* A curly-haired young man with an engaging smile was in charge.

"Step right up now, and take advantage of this stupendous offer. Three postcard size pictures for a bob, and a money prize if you get one of today's lucky numbers."

A chord was struck in Gilbert Langham's mind. "Haven't you got a place in Eastbourne?"

"Eastbourne, Littlehampton, Brighton, Worthing, Folkestone—a dozen places along the coast," the young man said. "But only one set of prizes each day, and each day at a different town. Today it's Brighton. Come along, you lucky people, we're offering you twenty-five quid to nothing."

"You were offering prizes in Eastbourne yesterday," Langham said. "Did you happen to see an old lady named Miss Penny?"

The young man looked at him sharply, then shouted inside the hut, "Just going out for a cuppa," and led the way to a self-service café twenty yards away from the hut. He put three spoonfuls of sugar in his tea, stirred, and said, "The name's Wilson, Charlie Wilson. What's yours?"

"Gilbert Langham."

"So now we know each other's

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monicker. I like to know who I'm talking to. Now, what's your interest?"

There was something a shade odd about the young man, Langham thought, as though he knew that working for Nu-Stile-Pickshers demanded a front of brass that was not natural to him. A university graduate seeing the other side of life?

"I'm one of the coach party she was with. I write crime stories and her death roused—well, you might call it my professional curiosity."

"Fair enough. She came along yesterday, had her picture taken. Funny old girl! I remember the way she mucked around with her hat, trying it this way and that for effect. Then she went off. I told the police." He hesitated.

"You've remembered something else." Gilbert Langham was careful not to sound too eager.

"Not exactly. It's just that they were only trying to fix a time, and I told them she came along at a quarter to five. They didn't want anything else, so I didn't tell them."

"Tell them what?"

"She seemed a bit excited, as if she was going to meet someone. And after she left the hut she did meet someone. I saw her."

"What did he look like?"

"I only caught a glimpse, mind. And side face. I'm not sure I could identify him. But he was a good-looking sort of chap, about her own age I should say. And he had a fine crop of iron-gray hair."

Mr. Antrobus.

"Superintendent Lake, please," he said into the receiver. "Tell him it's Gilbert Langham. About Miss Penny."

There was a click and he heard Lake's voice, with its faint undertone of sarcasm. "Yes, Mr. Langham?"

With attempted casualness he said, "I've been talking to a man named Wilson, who works for those Nu-Stile-Pickshers people. He saw Miss Penny walking with somebody after she had her photograph taken yesterday."

"Why didn't he tell us?"

"You were concentrating on the time," he said with a touch of complacency. "Wilson's not sure that he could identify the man, but says he had a fine crop of gray hair. From the description it might be a man on the tour named Antrobus."

There was silence. Then Lake said, "Miss Penny died between six and six thirty. Antrobus was in the hotel lounge a minute or two after six o'clock. Three or four people saw him."

"Alibis have been broken before now," Gilbert Langham said. He put down the receiver.

The telephone booth was opposite the Palace Pier. When he came out of it he hesitated. The coach party had split up, some of them going on a tour of the Royal Pa-

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vilion, and others preferring what was rather oddly called "Free Time." They were all to meet back at the Packham Hotel at half-past six. With an hour to fill, Gilbert Langham went on to the Palace Pier.

He strolled idly, sniffing the salt air, until he saw ahead of him the gray hair and slightly shuffling walk of Mr. Antrobus. It was with a feeling that he was about to make a discovery of vital importance that he cautiously followed the gray head up the pier, and with some disappointment that he saw Mr. Antrobus turn into the Palace of Pleasure and settle down to play a game called Cup and Ball, at which he proved to be rather skillful.

He went up behind Antrobus and said, "Hello!"

The gray-haired man turned round with what might have been a look of alarm, but when he recognized Langham, it was only one of annoyance. "Good afternoon."

"You didn't go to the Pavilion?"

"Evidently not."

"You're not forced to do anything on this sort of tour—that's what I like about it."

Mr. Antrobus did not reply. He shot up a small silver ball and dexterously caught it in the cup.

"Where did you go with Miss Penny after you met her yesterday afternoon?"

Mr. Antrobus was about to catch another ball. His hand jerked, and he dropped it. He turned round and said very decidedly, "I did not meet Miss Penny. I did not even know her. You are being a nuisance. Will you please go away?"

Gilbert Langham went away.

When the tour of the Pavilion was over, the Blakes and the tour guide, Jerry Benton, went down to the beach.

"Have you made up your minds?" Jerry Benton asked.

"Let me see it again." There was something greedy in Bill Blake's voice.

They sat down. Jerry drew from an inside pocket something wrapped in tissue. As he unwrapped it, the white stone sparkled in the sunlight.

"Oh, Bill," Mary Blake breathed, "it's lovely, lovely!"

"You're asking a hundred," her husband said. "That's a lot of money."

"A quarter of what it's worth." Jerry Benton began to wrap the stone.

"Don't put it away. I told you, I don't know anything about diamonds. I'd need to have it examined by a jeweler."

"And have him asking where it came from? Not likely! I risked a five-year sentence to bring this in. I'm not having any jeweler poking his nose in."

"Bill," said Mary Blake in a small voice, "Mr. Tompkins said last night that he knew a lot about jewelry. Supposing he looked at it for

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us, would that—?" She left the sentence unfinished.

"That would suit me." Blake looked at Benton.

Benton hesitated, then shrugged. "Tompkins doesn't love me much. But all right. You can show it to him tonight."

He let the stone rest in his palm. Blake could not take his eyes off it.

"Another whiskey?" Bill Blake said.

"I don't mind if I do." Tompkins was wearing a brightly checked shirt, open to reveal his boiled red neck, and purplish linen trousers. He downed half the whiskey at a gulp and sighed with pleasure. "This is the life."

"Mr. Tompkins." Mary Blake put her pretty arms on the bar counter and looked at him with her birdlike head on one side. "You said you used to be an agent for a firm of jewelers."

"Correct, my dear lady. Brant and Boulding, Hatton Garden, dealers in precious stones."

"Would you look at a stone for us?"

Tompkins frowned. "Mixing business and pleasure—don't like that. Why d'you want me to look at it?"

"We'd pay you—" Bill Blake began, but his wife interrupted.

"We're thinking of buying it and wondered how much we should pay. And we're awfully stupid about these things. We thought we'd come to an expert."

The frown changed to a leer. "Anything to oblige a charming lady," Tompkins said.

Upstairs in Tompkins' room, Bill Blake took out of his pocket the stone wrapped in tissue which Jerry Benton had given him, with the remark that nobody could say he didn't trust his fellow men. Tompkins glanced at it, raised his thick eyebrows, and then took from his suitcase a jeweler's glass which he put into his eye.

He examined the stone carefully, turning it this way and that for perhaps half a minute. When he spoke his tone was professional.

"It's a diamond, and quite a fine one. Not cut as well as it might be, but still a very nice stone."

"How much is it worth?"

Tompkins took the glass out of his eye, and grinned at them conspiratorially. "You notice I haven't asked where it came from, and I don't want to know. But if you were asking me to buy it, that's the first question I'd ask."

"I'm not asking you to buy it. What's it worth?"

"I'm telling you the difficulty about selling it is that any honest jeweler will ask the same question. He'll want to be sure it came into this country legally." Now Tompkins winked.

"We shouldn't want to sell it," Mary Blake said excitedly. "It's to make into a ring for me."

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Tompkins rubbed his chin. "Hard to put a value on it. Wouldn't be dear at two hundred quid."

"Oh, you darling man," Mary Blake said. She kissed Tompkins on the cheek.

The Merry Widow was telling Gilbert Langham the story of her life, as they sat in deck chairs on the front. Her husband, a colonel in the Engineers, had gone through the war unscratched, and had then died in a yachting accident shortly after his retirement, three years ago.

"No children," she said, turning on him the full force of still-lustrous eyes. "And this rambling old house in Shropshire to look after. I'm a lonely woman, Gil."

Gilbert Langham was not much interested in her past. "You remember that yesterday evening we were sitting in the lounge of that hotel at Eastbourne. Did you happen to notice what time that man Antrobus came into the lounge?"

"I already told the police that as far as I could remember it was about six o'clock," Elaine Williams said coldly.

"You couldn't be more exact?"

"No. I must be going back to the hotel." As she got up she said, "I detest snoopers."

Gilbert Langham sighed. The way of an amateur detective is hard.

That night there was a fireworks display at the end of the Palace Pier, and tickets were free for those who wanted them.

"I must say," said Mr. Portingale, a self-important, pigeon-chested man who went about with a limp, long-nosed wife apparently permanently attached to his arm, "That young chap Benton knows how to manage things. As a businessman myself, I respect efficiency."

"He's very good," Gilbert Langham agreed. He was watching Mr. Antrobus to see if he took one of the tickets. He did, after asking whether they were free.

"My husband had thirty men under him at his retirement," Mrs. Portingale said in a melancholy voice.

"A versatile young fellow, too," Portingale resumed. "Used to be in the diamond trade, I understand. Adventurous."

"It takes all sorts to make a world," Mrs. Portingale said sadly.

"Yes, indeed." Langham took one of the tickets. The Portingales took them, too.

The night was hot, the sea still. Rockets swished up skyward, burst into patterns of stars. A set piece slowly made the pattern WELCOME TO BRIGHTON. There was a burst of clapping.

"It's simply gorgeous," Mary Blake said. "Perfect. I want it to last forever. Have you told Jerry about the ring, darling?"

"A hundred pounds is okay," her husband said. "I'll give you a check

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tomorrow." He produced the stone in its tissue and Benton took it.

"No checks, old man. Strictly cash. If you can let me have the money at the end of the tour I'll hand over the stone then." His teeth gleamed in a smile. "You can ask Tompkins to vet it for you again then, if you like. See you later." He waved a graceful hand.

"I wonder why he insists on cash." Blake took out his pipe and tapped it thoughtfully on the rail.

"He's just being careful, silly. Ooh!" A cascade of colored lights exploded just above their heads. The hand that she had placed over her husband's clutched at him, the nails digging gently into his palm.

"I want some cigarettes," Elaine Williams said, and opened her bag. "Oh, damn! I've forgotten my purse."

Portingale, who was sitting just behind her, took out his case. She murmured her thanks, lighted the cigarette, took a few puffs, then murmured something about going back to the hotel, and got up.

It was a few minutes afterward that Langham, who had been temporarily enthralled by a set piece depicting the battle of Trafalgar, with the *Victory's* guns magnificently firing, noticed that Antrobus was not in his place. He got up and walked down the pier to look for him. But the man with gray hair had vanished.

Elaine Williams did not go back to the hotel. An hour later she was walking by the cliffs near Rottingdean, talking about her husband's death and the big house in Shropshire.

"Yes," her companion said. "Yes. Yes."

"The truth is that I am a very lonely woman."

"We are all lonely." Her companion took her hand and led her nearer to the cliff top.

"Sometimes—you'll think it foolish—my heart really aches." She guided his hand to her aching heart.

"You're not foolish at all." Another hand encircled her shoulder. She held up her face to be kissed.

Then she felt herself being forced backward, and opened her lips to scream, but the hand that had been on her heart quickly covered them. Her high heels scrabbled at the cliff edge before she went over . . .

It was no more than eleven o'clock in the morning, but already a fierce sun shone into the little room. The sandy sergeant he had seen before waved Gilbert Langham into a seat directly facing the window and the glare. Superintendent Lake sat in the shade.

"Now, Mr. Langham, I shall value the results of your skilled observation. What have you got to tell me?"

"I still don't know exactly what's happened," Gilbert Langham said.

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"There are all sorts of rumors. Nobody knew that Mrs. Williams hadn't come back to the hotel until this morning. Your people haven't really told us much."

"She's dead," Lake said. "She fell, or was pushed, off the cliffs near Rottingdean some time yesterday evening. There's a drop of about eighty feet and she was probably killed at once. She'd been dead several hours when she was found, early this morning."

Lake paused, then said, "There was a book found near the body, looked as if it had been thrown from the cliff top."

He held up a book on the desk before him, its cover spotted with damp. Gilbert Langham read the title on the back. It was *The Suicide's Grave* by James Hogg.

"That's not been gutted."

"Not this time. But the queer thing is that it should have been there at all. What sort of woman was Mrs. Williams?"

"I thought of her as the Merry Widow. She was flirtatious, particularly with young men."

"With you, for instance?"

"Yes. Though I lost favor because I didn't react properly when she said she was lonely. She seemed to like Jerry Benton, the guide. But it didn't mean anything. She'd have behaved the same way with any other young man."

"Mr. Langham." Lake leaned forward. The outlines of his face were harsh. "It seems likely that Mrs. Williams died through what you call flirtatiousness with a young man—or an old one. And since whoever killed her left a mystery book, as he did with Miss Penney, it's a fair assumption that the murderer is linked with your coach party. I want you to tell me exactly what you saw and heard after going out to watch the fireworks."

"At about nine o'clock or a little after, Mrs. Williams left us, saying she was going to the hotel. She'd left her purse there, had no money to buy cigarettes—"

Lake interrupted. "She said she had no money—you're sure of that?"

"Yes. A man named Portingale was sitting just behind her. He offered her a cigarette."

"Her handbag went over the cliff with her. There was a five-pound note in it."

"No purse?"

"Her purse was in the hotel. But a five-pound note is money. Why didn't she use it?"

A bluebottle buzzed on the windowpane. The glare of sunlight was hot on Gilbert Langham's body. He felt slightly damp.

Lake went on, "She didn't go back to the hotel—she went to meet somebody. It must all have been arranged in advance." He said sharply to Langham, "What happened after she left?"

Langham told him of Atrobus' disappearance and of his own movements.

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"You say you got back to the hotel just after eleven. Nobody saw you?"

"No."

"You didn't go out again?"

"Of course not."

"I'm keeping the coach party here for the moment. Let me know if you have any intention of leaving Brighton, won't you?"

Gilbert Langham got up and said incredulously, "You mean you suspect *me*?"

"I suspect everybody." Lake smiled. "I'm still in need of suggestions, even from amateur criminologists."

"There ought to be some sort of clue in that book."

"There are no prints on it, if that's what you mean."

"No." Langham picked it up. "You see, this book is usually called *The Memoirs of a Justified Sinner.* This is a special edition, published in 1895, and it just might be possible to trace it."

"Nothing on the flyleaf, sir," said the sergeant.

"No, but—" Langham, leafing through the pages, gave an exclamation.

"What is it?" Lake came round the table, and Langham pointed out what he had found.

At the bottom of a page in the middle of the book, very small and faint, was a circular die-stamped mark. It said: *Charles Antrobus. Dealer in Rare Books. Specialist in Crime and the Occult.*

Lake said to the sergeant, "Duff, I think we'll have a word with Mr. Antrobus. No, hang on a minute. Ask Benton to come in first. I'd like to know whether he's got any details of when and how Antrobus booked for this coach tour, whether his bookings were linked with Miss Penny's and Mrs. Williams', for instance. That might help."

"Yes, sir."

"You're thinking we were stupid to have missed that," Lake said to Langham when the sergeant had left them.

"Why, no. This is a favorite book of mine. I happened to know it was an unusual edition—"

"It was careless. Two of us have looked through the book and we ought to have seen it. We've been doing fifty different things since the body was found this morning, but that's no excuse."

The Superintendent crossed to the window and stood looking out. The street was shimmering with heat. "I don't know why people go abroad when we have weather like this in England."

"Have you found out anything more about Miss Penny?"

"Yes. It confirms that she was just what she seemed to be—a nice old lady who hadn't much money and lived a quiet life. There's no motive. Duff's taking his time." He rattled money in his pocket.

The door opened, and the sergeant came in, breathing hard. "He's not there, sir."

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"Antrobus?"

"No, Benton."

Lake's face went very red. "I thought I gave instructions that nobody in the party was to leave the hotel until I'd talked to them."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant said stolidly, "We had men at the front door. Reckon he skipped down the fire escape. There are some people called Portingale looking for him—say he was in the hotel ten minutes ago."

"Right," Lake said. "Let's get up to his room."

Mr. Portingale, wife connected to him like a broken-down car being towed, was waiting for them in the passage. "Inspector, I have something I want to report to you—"

"Superintendent," Lake snapped. "It will have to wait." He turned to the sergeant. "Duff, he'll reckon on having at least half an hour's start. Chances are he'll take a train for London. Go to the station. Take someone with you who knows him by sight."

"I'll go along," Gilbert Langham said. In the car Sergeant Duff expressed himself rather scornfully about the likelihood of Benton catching a train.

"One of the Super's not so bright ideas," he said. "There's more ways out of Brighton than out of a rabbit's burrow. If he tries the train he wants his brains tested."

"It's the quickest way of getting up to London," Langham said absently.

He was astonished by the turn of events. If Benton was the murderer, what was the meaning of the books placed by the bodies? He was pondering this problem when the police car pulled up outside Brighton Station with a screech of brakes.

The station, clean and bright, was comparatively empty at this time of the morning and Duff, who had been so skeptical in the car, was full of energy in action. Within no time at all, it seemed, he had learned that the last train for London had gone half an hour back, and that the next one left in ten minutes' time from Platform Three.

"Wouldn't have had time for the last one," Duff said as they walked along the train corridor. "Now, you look out for him. Brown face, medium height, good-looking, bit film starrish, you said. Might apply to me, eh?" He was in his forties and looked like a sandy-haired monkey.

Benton was not on the train. "Didn't suppose he would be," Duff said as they went back along the platform. "Knew it was a wild goose chase. We'll just stay around till the train goes. You get over by the departure board there and make yourself inconspicuous. I'll stay by the entrance. Give me the office if you spot him."

Langham nodded. The train left at 12:15. At exactly thirteen minutes past twelve Jerry Benton walked briskly out of the station

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lavatory with an attaché case in his hand, looked once round the station, and began to walk to Platform Three. Gilbert Langham raised his hand and Duff nodded.

Perhaps it was this gesture that made Benton look toward the departure board. He saw Langham, changed direction, and began to run out of the station. Duff and Gilbert Langham ran after him. Benton had several yards start.

He was almost out of the station when a family consisting of father, mother, babe in arms, and a screaming small boy wearing a cowboy hat and carrying a spade and bucket, entered it. The small boy stuck the spade between Benton's legs and he went down with a crash. Before he could get up Duff and Langham were on him.

The small boy had stopped screaming, and looked slightly awestruck at the effect of his work. "Now, Bertie," said his mother, "you didn't ought to have done that."

"Oh yes, he did," said Duff, holding Benton's arm in a lock. "He's helped to make an important arrest. Are you Wyatt Earp?" he asked the boy.

"Nah, I'm Matt Dillon."

"Well, buy yourself another gun, Matt, will you?" He gave the boy half a crown.

"Can't buy much of a gun for 'alf a crown," the boy said.

The last words they heard as they got into the police car were his mother's. "There you are, Bertie. I told you you should have left the gentleman alone."

"She's got the right idea," Benton said, and grinned.

He did not look like a murderer, Gilbert Langham thought. But then, had he any idea at all what this particular murderer did look like?

They went back to the hotel room where Lake had conducted his interrogations. There Mr. Portingale stood, indignation filling his pigeon chest. There also, Langham saw with surprise, were the Blakes.

"All right, Benton. What have you got to say?" Lake's tone was rough.

"I don't know what this is all about." Benton smiled. "I just got fed up with the job and decided to chuck it."

Lake sighed. "Mr. Portingale."

Mr. Portingale took from his pocket something wrapped in tissue. When he unwrapped the tissue a stone gleamed in the sunlight.

"You offered me this for a hundred pounds, said it was a diamond. Then this morning you asked me for twenty pounds cash deposit, which I gave you, and handed me the stone. Later on I happened to be speaking to Mr. Blake—"

Blake produced another stone. "We took them to a jeweler. They're not diamonds, just quartz."

"How many more have you got in that case?" Lake asked.

"Six," Benton said calmly. "I

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don't know what they're moaning about. I never guaranteed the stones. They were sold to me as diamonds. I suggested they should contact somebody who would check on them."

"It's no good, Benton." Lake nodded to Duff.

The sergeant went outside. When the door reopened it revealed, to Gilbert Langham's astonishment, the bald head, puce face, and checkered shirt of Tompkins. The back-slapping geniality was gone, however. Tompkins had no eyes for anybody but Benton.

"You rat," he said, "skipping and leaving me to hold the bag. Did you think I'd go for that?"

"All right," Benton said. "It's a cop. But I had nothing to do with those two women getting done in. That put the wind up me, I don't mind telling you."

"If I'm not much mistaken we shall find that both these boys have got records as long as my arm," Lake said. He addressed himself to the Portingales and the Blakes. "A nice little racket they ran together. You see how it worked. Benton spread a rumor about smuggling diamonds, then showed you the stone. He couldn't let you take it away and show it to a jeweler, so Tompkins meanwhile makes it known that he's an expert, and also that he dislikes Benton. He certifies the stone as genuine. If everything had gone as planned, you'd have handed over a hundred pounds each at the end of the tour and never seen either of them again. You're lucky that Benton got the wind up and tried to skip."

"We had nothing to do with the other business," Tompkins said. "You can see it queered our pitch, the police coming in."

"I believe you," Lake said, and sighed again. "Take them away."

"That leaves Mr. Antrobus," Gilbert Langham said.

It was one o'clock, just two hours since he had made that momentous discovery about the book.

"Yes. We've delayed our talk with him long enough. What's his room number, Duff?"

"Second floor. Two fourteen. But he may have come down to the lounge."

The lounge was buzzing with excited members of the coach party who had seen Benton and Tompkins taken away by the police, but Antrobus was not among them. They took the elevator up. Duff strode ahead along the corridor.

"Here we are. Two ten, two twelve." He stopped abruptly sniffing.

"Gas." Lake put a handkerchief round his mouth and nose, and turned the door handle of Room 214. The room was not locked, the blinds were drawn. The smell of gas rushed out at them.

Lake ran across the room pulled aside the curtain, opened the win-

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dow wide, turned off the gas tap, and came out coughing. "Doctor," he said to Duff. The sergeant ran down the corridor.

Looking over Lake's shoulder, Gilbert Langham could see the body of Mr. Antrobus lying on the floor, his head near to, but not quite resting on, a pillow. The hose connecting the gas tap to a fire set into the wall had been pulled away and lay just by the man's mouth.

Lake drummed on the wall with his fingers while they waited for the gas to clear. "This looks like the end of the road."

"I suppose so." Yet Langham left queerly disappointed.

When they were able to enter the room they found further evidence. At a little writing desk in one corner of the room was a scrap of paper penciled in a fine, thin, clerkly hand: *I feel the bitterest regret for what has happened. I cannot go on . . .*"

Langham bent down to look at the note, and Lake said quickly, "Don't touch it."

"That paper has been torn off a larger sheet. I wonder why he was so parsimonious." The Superintendent was kneeling by the body, extracting a wallet from the jacket. There was a pencil beside the note, a yellow Venus 3B. Langham opened his mouth to say something else, then closed it again. Lake was going through the wallet.

"Pound notes—a wad of them. Membership cards of various societies. Check book. Nothing personal. Ah, this is interesting. Membership for the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association in the name of Charles Antrobus. He simply told me he'd retired from business. Ah, hello, Doctor."

The doctor examined the body briefly, then shook his head. "No hope, I'm afraid. He's had the gas tube in his mouth for hours."

"How many hours?"

"I wouldn't like to say. Some time last night, certainly. He's had a knock on the head at some time. Not very long ago, either."

"Enough to stun him?" Gilbert Langham asked.

"Possibly."

"Supposing he'd turned on the gas tap and sat down to write his suicide note," Lake suggested. "He might have been overcome by the gas, fallen, and struck his head on the gas fire. Could that have happened?"

"I suppose so," the doctor said, without much conviction.

"And that would explain why his head wasn't *on* the pillow but *beside* it. Suicides generally like to make themselves comfortable. But why didn't somebody find him earlier this morning? I think we might ask the reception desk. Then I suppose I should have a word with the rest of the tour party. Duff, will you get them together for me in one of the lounges?"

When they left the bedroom, the photographers and fingerprint

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men were at work. Downstairs, Lake said to the young receptionist, "Did Mr. Antrobus in two fourteen leave any sort of message last night?"

"I'll find out for you, sir. Edward, the night porter, would have taken any message at that time."

Edward was old and gnarled as a tree trunk. "Mr Antrobus? Yes, sir. He rang about eleven o'clock last night, said he had a migraine headache, and didn't want to be disturbed until after lunchtime today."

"Do you know Mr. Antrobus?" Langham asked. "Would you recognize his voice?"

The porter shook his head. "Why, no, sir. He was one of those on the coach tour, that's all I know. Wouldn't know him to speak to at all."

"You're hard to satisfy, Langham," Lake said. "You put us on to Antrobus in the first place. Now when you're proved right you're still unhappy."

"Somebody else could have been in that room, hit Antrobus on the head, put the gas tube in his mouth, and rung down to the porter."

"In theory, yes. In practice the obvious explanation is right ninety-nine times in every hundred. Just wait till we dig into Antrobus' background. You'll find he's a psycho, and that he killed those two women for some reason that doesn't make sense to you or me, and then committed suicide. Now I'm going to break the news to the rest of them. If I'm not much mistaken, with three casualties and two arrests in the party, they'll want to go home. Are you coming?"

Langham shook his head. He walked moodily toward the potted palms at the hotel entrance. The name "Antrobus," spoken behind him, made him turn. A blonde girl wearing a dark blue frock stood by the reception desk.

"Were you asking for Mr. Antrobus?" Langham said.

"Why, yes. I'm Sheila Antrobus. He's my uncle."

"I'll handle this," he said to the receptionist. And then to the girl: "You must be prepared for a shock."

She was shocked, certainly, but she did not seem deeply surprised. "Uncle Charles had been getting odder and odder ever since his wife died two years ago. It made things a bit difficult for me, because he was my guardian."

"Odd in what way?"

"He was a dealer in rare books—crime books especially. Soon after Aunt Rose died he gave all that up, and in the last few months it's sometimes seemed to me that he really hated books."

"There's something else. You'll have to know about it soon. I may as well tell you." He told her about Miss Penny and Elaine Williams. "Do you think he might have done that?"

She said in a subdued voice, "I

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don't know. I'd like to see him, please."

They went up to the room. She looked at the figure on the floor, shivered and turned away.

"There's something I want you to see." He led her over to the desk and showed her the note. "Is that your uncle's writing?"

"His prints are on it," one of the fingerprint men said. "And on the pencil."

"Poor uncle," the girl said. Her face was very pale.

They walked out of the hotel, along the Marine Parade and into the Old Steine. "There's something I want to ask you," Gilbert Langham said. "Did your uncle draw?"

"Sometimes. He wasn't very good, but he liked to sketch." She looked surprised. "Why?"

"I know something about pencils. That note on the desk—the one that's supposed to be a suicide note—was written with a thin fine pencil, probably a 2H. The pencil on the desk is a 3B, a drawing pencil."

She said nothing. They walked round into Church Street. The North Gate to the Royal Pavilion was in front of them. "Shall we go in?"

"All right." She stopped and faced him. "What does it mean, about the pencils?"

"I believe your uncle was murdered. And if he was, then everything that has happened has been planned, with him as the final victim. You said he made things difficult for you. How?"

"I want to get married. I'm only twenty. Uncle Charles didn't approve of Chris. In fact, he very much disapproved. So we agreed to wait."

"Chris?"

"Chris Watling. The man I'm going to marry."

They stood in the Pavilion gardens, with the statue of George IV on one side and the cupola of the dome on the other, together with those other fragments of the eccentric architectural past now transformed to respectable library and art gallery. She opened her bag and took out a photograph. He looked at it, and felt as though he had been struck between the eyes.

The photograph told him almost the whole story.

"Tell me about Chris."

There was some unfathomable expression in her blue eyes. "You wanted to go into the Pavilion. Let's go, then."

He waved a hand at the onion domes. "Do you know Sydney Smith's joke about the Pavilion architecture? That the dome of St. Paul's must have come down to Brighton and pupped? But I like it."

She made no reply. They walked in silence through the Octagon Hall and the entrance hall. In the Chinese Corridor she said, staring intently

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at one of the bamboo plants on the wall. "What do you want to know?"

"About Chris."

"You've seen his photograph. He doesn't find it easy to settle in a job. That's what Uncle didn't like."

"He's been in trouble?"

"His father lost all his money when Chris was about thirteen. There was trouble a couple of years ago over some bad checks."

She turned to face him, her face desperate. "But he's awfully nice—Chris—he's such fun to be with. He's always wanting to do something dashing, something that will get his photograph in the papers. He makes a joke of it—he's full of jokes. There's nothing bad about him really. You've got to believe that."

"It might be easier for you if I guessed some of the story and you filled in the details. Your uncle was quite rich, and most of the money comes to you."

"All of it. He's got no other close relations and he is—was—very fond of me."

"He disapproved of Chris, more strongly than you said. He blamed himself for letting you go about with Chris, told you to stop seeing him, threatened in the good old Victorian way to cut you out of his will. Right?"

"I told you I'm not twenty-one yet and I didn't want to upset uncle. Do you think I cared about the money?"

"Chris cared about it, though. Didn't he?"

She turned and ran from him, ran back through the halls, while shocked respectable holiday-goers, wearing sleeveless shirts and with shorts above sun-reddened knees, looked after her. He found her in the garden.

"If your uncle died the money would come to you, and there would be no obstacle to your marriage. Uncle Charles was eccentric—he did odd things like coming on this coach tour. Why did he do that, by the way?"

"He always went on tours. He was awfully mean in little ways—said they were wonderful value for money. And this one attracted him because of going to a different place each day. All the places had piers. He loved playing the slot machines." She smiled faintly.

"Yes. Uncle Charles was eccentric, but he wasn't crazy. If Chris murdered him and tried to make it look like suicide, questions would be asked. But supposing it could be shown that Uncle Charles had really gone round the bend—supposing he'd killed two people and left the books he now hated beside his victims—then his suicide wouldn't be questioned. Superintendent Lake is prepared to accept it now."

"You mean that those two people, Miss Penny and Mrs. Williams, were murdered just to—"

"To convince people that your Uncle Charles was a psychopathic

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killer? I'm afraid so." He paused, said abruptly, "You recognized that so-called suicide note, didn't you? It was part of a letter from your Uncle to Chris."

"I don't know. There *was* a letter in which uncle said something like that, about blaming himself for letting me go around with Chris. But I still can't believe it was the same note. What makes you so sure?"

"Why, you see," Gilbert Langham said, "I know who Chris is."

When they got back to the hotel, Mr. Portingale stood in the doorway beside the potted palms. "Have you heard the news?" he asked eagerly. "Do you know that we have been nursing a pair of scoundrelly tricksters in our midst?"

Langham had almost forgotten about Benton and Tompkins. "The Superintendent has got them under lock and key, though, hasn't he?"

"Would you believe it, my dear sir, they tried to practice their arts on me. I'm afraid they picked the wrong person there, eh, Mrs. P.?" Mrs. Portingale, firmly attached to one arm, smiled and nodded. "But as a result our happy little party is broken up. The coach company is making a very handsome refund, and Mrs. P. and I are departing for fresh fields and pastures new."

To call the party a happy one seemed to Langham an overstatement. "Where are you going?"

Mr. Portingale beamed. "We are lucky enough to have been able to book with another coach tour. We are off to the New Forest. I believe that there are still one or two vacancies if you would care to—"

"No, thank you," Langham said hurriedly.

Sergeant Duff said cheerfully, "Where have you been? The Super's been looking for you—wants to pin a medal on your chest, I shouldn't wonder."

Langham said a little pompously. "This is Mr. Antrobus' niece, Sheila. We've got to see the Superintendent urgently. Some fresh information about the case."

Duff scratched his sandy head. "The trouble with you amateurs is you never can let well alone. The Super's round at the station."

They went to the station and found Lake. He listened impatiently, until Sheila Antrobus produced the photograph.

"That's Chris Watling," Gilbert Langham said.

Lake gasped. Then he said, "This seems to be an occasion for a little telephoning." When he put down the receiver after a telephone call to London he said, "He's in Folkestone."

"What are we waiting for?" Langham asked.

From the promenade at Folkestone you can reach the beach either by way of the two lifts that go up

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and down together, working in series, or, more circuitously, by the famous zigzag with its right-angled paths separated by banks of shrubs. Or you can get to the beach by going through the Old Town, emerging near the harbor. The police car came round there and stopped.

They began to walk across the shingle, past the children's playground.

"You understand what to do, Miss Antrobus?" Lake said. "If you don't feel up to it, say so now."

"I'm up to it."

"Good." Lake was brisk. "We'll follow you slowly as you walk along the lower promenade. We won't be more than a few yards away."

The lower promenade was full of people buying candy, ice cream, and cups of tea. Children were crowded round a Punch and Judy show.

Langham jumped down to the pebbled beach and watched. Sheila Antrobus threaded her way along through the people, putting one foot precisely before another, unhurried and cool-looking in her dark blue dress.

She stopped in front of a hut that stood beside an ice cream stall, and said, "Hullo, Chris."

The young man who had called himself Charlie Wilson was talking earnestly to a prospective customer for Nu-Stile-Pickshers. He stopped speaking, and the look on his face was, for a moment, that of one who wakes to find that some private nightmare—the death of a loved child or an ordeal by fire—has come true. Then his engagingly boyish smile was in place again, and he said, "Why, Sheila ducks, whatever are you doing in Folkestone?"

"You didn't tell me you were doing this sort of thing."

"I said I was doing a job for a few weeks that was great fun. Don't you call this fun?" He said to the customer, "Do go in, madam, you'll find the photographer inside. And don't forget, if you get a lucky number you win one of today's cash prizes."

"Chris, I want to talk to you."

"Of course, ducks." He shouted —and how well Gilbert Langham, who heard it before, remembered his shouting the same words—"Just going for a cuppa." He fell into step with her and said, "There's a little place along here with an old lady running it who just loves me."

"They all love you, don't they?" Sheila Antrobus said. "I mean, the ladies."

He stared at her with what seemed unaffected surprise. "I don't know what you mean. If you don't like my doing this job, all right. You're always saying I ought to work, and there aren't so many jobs that fit my peculiar talents."

Sheila Antrobus went on talking, slowly and without expression, as

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though some sort of machine had been wound up inside her. "Especially the ladies who got the prizes. That was the way it happened, wasn't it? You found out the people who were on the coach tour, got into conversation as they passed you, had their photographs taken or took them yourself, and then told the ones you picked, the unattached women, that their number had come up and they'd won a prize. After that, naturally they were delighted to meet such a charming young man a little later on to receive the prize. That was where the five-pound note came from that was in Mrs. Williams' handbag, wasn't it? You left that note in her bag by mistake, didn't you? Careless, Chris."

"Sheila." He jumped back as though she had jabbed him with a needle.

"And it wasn't really a clever idea to leave that note, from the letter he wrote you. If I came down, there was a good chance I'd recognize it. But I suppose you thought I'd marry you anyway."

Very slowly now, the record dying down, she said, "After we'd married, Chris, what would have happened to me?"

He made an ineffectual gesture with his hand, still backing away. Langham began to move up the shingle and at the same time Lake and Duff, behind Sheila, quickened their steps.

Chris Watling turned, bolted for the nearest entrance to the zigzag and began to run up it.

Lake and Duff went after him. Langham paused beside the girl who stood, looking upward, with no expression at all on her face.

"That must have been terrible for you."

Her voice was harsh. "I've done what you asked, haven't I? You said I could break him down, while the police might not be able to do. Now he's running. That's what you all wanted."

"You talk as though you didn't want him to be caught. He's killed three people."

"I love him." She said it flatly. They watched the figures running up the paths between the shrubs. "He's gaining on them."

"Lake's got a man waiting at the top."

For a few moments Watling was out of sight, hidden by a turn in the path. Then he emerged, and they could see the man who stood solidly blocking the exit. Watling took something from his pocket and ran toward the man at the top.

"He's got a gun," Langham said.

They heard two small sharp cracks, and the man went down. They could see Watling now, far above, running along the front, firing backward at Lake and Duff. He reached the entrance to the lift leading down to the beach, and paused.

"He's coming down." Langham began to run toward the red-brick

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Victorian lift house. The girl followed him.

When they reached it, Langham said to the attendant, "There's a man coming down in that lift who's wanted for murder. Can't you stop him?"

"No, sir. He can't get out, though. Door's bolted outside."

They stared up and saw the great wooden cage on wheels descending. Above it was a sign: *The Lift. Fare 3d. One Minute to Center of Town.* The two lifts moving up and down worked together, and as the wooden cage from the top descended they could see some sort of confused activity inside it. There was a crash of glass, and they saw Watling climbing out of the window, still holding the revolver. He swung out and up onto the curved lift roof.

"He's going to jump over to the other one," Langham said.

No doubt Lake and Duff were now running down the slope, and Watling thought he might get away at the top. It was almost certainly hopeless—the crowd would never let him off the lift, revolver or no revolver—but he was going to try it.

They watched him poised on the top of the sloping cage as it slowly descended and the other lift rose to meet it. When the two cages were almost level, he jumped easily from one to the other.

"He's done it," the attendant cried out.

But Watling had failed to get a proper purchase on the lift's curved top. They could see him desperately trying to get a grip with hands and feet. Like a figure in a slow motion film his body slipped away from the lift roof. Then suddenly he dropped, limp as a puppet.

Sheila Antrobus turned away her head and screamed.

The broken thing that had caught in the cable at the bottom was not quite dead when Gilbert Langham reached it. The lips moved, whispered, "Sheila."

"Yes?"

The smile was as engaging as ever. "Tell her I shall have my picture in the papers."

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If ever a Special Award (a black cape casting a batlike shadow) is given for the modern Vampire Story, if ever EQMM decides to start a Vampire Department, if ever a Vampire Anthology is put together (with blood, sweat, and tearsheets), if ever a history is written on the Care, Feeding, and Propagation of Vampires, we nominate Robert Bloch to get the Award, head the Department, edit the Anthology, and write the History . . .

THE LIVING DEAD

by ROBERT BLOCH

ALL DAY LONG HE RESTED, WHILE THE guns thundered in the village below. Then, in the slanting shadows of the late afternoon, the rumbling echoes faded into the distance and he knew it was over. The American advance had crossed the river. They were gone at last, and it was safe once more.

Above the village, in the crumbling ruins of the great chateau atop the wooded hillside, Count Barsac emerged from the crypt.

The Count was tall and thin—cadaverously thin, in a manner most hideously appropriate. His face and hands had a waxen pallor; his hair was dark, but not as dark as his eyes and the hollows beneath them. His cloak was black, and the sole touch of color about his person was the vivid redness of his lips when they curled in a smile.

He was smiling now, in the twilight, for it was time to play the game.

The name of the game was Death, and the Count had played it many times.

He had played it in Paris on the stage of the Grand Guignol; his name had been plain Eric Karon then, but still he'd won a certain renown for his interpretation of bizarre roles. Then the war had come, and with it, his opportunity.

Long before the Germans took Paris, he'd joined their Underground, working long and well. As an actor he'd been invaluable.

And this, of course, was his ultimate reward—to play the supreme role, not on the stage, but in real life. To play without the artifice of spotlights, in true darkness; this was the actor's dream come true. He had even helped to fashion the plot.

"Simplicity itself," he told his German superiors. "Chateau Barsac has been deserted since the Revolution. None of the peasants from the village dare to venture near it, even in daylight, because of the legend.

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It is said, you see, that the last Count Barsac was a vampire."

And so it was arranged. The short-wave transmitter had been set up in the large crypt beneath the chateau, with three skilled operators in attendance, working in shifts. And he, "Count Barsac," in charge of the entire operation, as guardian angel. Rather, as guardian demon.

"There is a graveyard on the hillside below," he informed them. "A humble resting place for poor and ignorant people. It contains a single imposing crypt—the ancestral tomb of the Barsacs. We shall open that crypt, remove the remains of the last Count, and allow the villagers to discover that the coffin is empty. They will never dare come near the spot or the chateau again, because this will prove that the legend is true—Count Barsac is a vampire, and walks once more."

The question came then. "What if there are skeptics? What if someone does not believe?"

And he had his answer ready. "They will believe. For at night I shall walk—I, Count Barsac."

After they saw him in the make-up, wearing the black cloak, there were no more questions. The role was his.

The role was his, and he'd played it well. The Count nodded to himself as he climbed the stairs and entered the roofless foyer of the chateau, where only a configuration of cobwebs veiled the radiance of the rising moon.

Now, of course, the curtain must come down. If the American advance had swept past the village below, it was time to make one's bow and exit. And that too had been well arranged.

During the German withdrawal another advantageous use had been made of the tomb in the graveyard. A cache of Air Marshal Goering's art treasures now rested safely and undisturbed within the crypt. A truck had been placed in the chateau. Even now, the three wireless operators would be playing new parts—driving the truck down the hillside to the tomb, placing the objets d'art in it.

By the time the Count arrived there, everything would be packed. They would then don the stolen American Army uniforms, carry the forged identifications and permits, drive through the lines across the river, and rejoin the German forces at a predesignated spot. Nothing had been left to chance. Some day, when he wrote his memoirs—

But there was no time to consider that now. The Count glanced up through the gaping aperture in the ruined roof. The moon was high. It was time to leave.

In a way he hated to go. Where others saw only dust and cobwebs he saw a stage—the setting of his finest performance. Playing a vampire's role had not addicted him to the taste of blood—but as an actor

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he enjoyed the taste of triumph. And he had triumphed here.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow." Shakespeare's line. Shakespeare, who had written of ghosts and witches, of bloody apparitions. Because Shakespeare knew that his audiences, the stupid masses, believed in such things—just as they still believed today. A great actor could always make them believe.

The Count moved into the shadowy darkness outside the entrance of the chateau. He started down the pathway toward the beckoning trees.

It was here, amid the trees, that he had come upon Raymond, one evening weeks ago. Raymond had been his most appreciative audience —a stern, dignified, white-haired elderly man, mayor of the village of Barsac. But there had been nothing dignified about the old fool when he'd caught sight of the Count looming up before him out of the night. He'd screamed like a woman and run.

Probably Raymond had been prowling around, intent on poaching, but all that had been forgotten after his encounter in the woods. The mayor was the one to thank for spreading the rumors that the Count was again abroad. He and Clodez, the oafish miller, had then led an armed band to the graveyard and entered the Barsac tomb. What a fright they got when they discovered the Count's coffin open and empty!

The coffin had contained only dust that had been scattered to the winds, but they could not know that. Nor could they know about what had happened to Suzanne.

The Count was passing the banks of the small stream now. Here, on another evening, he'd found the girl—Raymond's daughter, as luck would have it—in an embrace with young Antoine LeFevre, her lover. Antoine's shattered leg had invalided him out of the army, but he ran like a deer when he glimpsed the cloaked and grinning Count. Suzanne had been left behind and that was unfortunate, because it was necessary to dispose of her. Her body had been buried in the woods, beneath great stones, and there was no question of discovery; still, it was a regrettable incident.

In the end, however, everything was for the best. Now silly superstitious Raymond was doubly convinced that the vampire walked. He had seen the creature himself, had seen the empty tomb and the open coffin; his own daughter had disappeared. At his command none dared venture near the graveyard, the woods, or the chateau beyond.

Poor Raymond! He was not even a mayor any more—his village had been destroyed in the bombardment. Just an ignorant, broken old man, mumbling his idiotic nonsense about the "living dead."

The Count smiled and walked on, his cloak fluttering in the breeze, casting a batlike shadow on the

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pathway before him. He could see the graveyard now, the tilted tombstones rising from the earth like leprous fingers rotting in the moonlight. His smile faded; he did not like such thoughts. Perhaps the greatest tribute to his talent as an actor lay in his actual aversion to death, to darkness and what lurked in the night. He hated the sight of blood, had developed within himself an almost claustrophobic dread of the confinement of the crypt.

Yes, it had been a great role, but he was thankful it was ending. It would be good to play the man once more, and cast off the creature he had created.

As he approached the crypt he saw the truck waiting in the shadows. The entrance to the tomb was open, but no sounds issued from it. That meant his colleagues had completed their task of loading and were ready to go. All that remained now was to change his clothing, remove the makeup, and depart.

The Count moved to the darkened truck. And then—

Then they were upon him, and he felt the tines of the pitchfork bite into his back, and as the flash of lanterns dazzled his eyes he heard the stern command. "Don't move!"

He didn't move. He could only stare as they surrounded him—Antoine, Clodez, Raymond, and the others, a dozen peasants from the village. A dozen armed peasants, glaring at him in mingled rage and fear, holding him at bay.

But how could they dare?

The American Corporal stepped forward. That was the answer, of course—the American Corporal and another man in uniform, armed with a sniper's rifle. They were responsible. He didn't even have to see the riddled corpses of the three short-wave operators piled in the back of the truck to understand what had happened. They'd stumbled on his men while they worked, shot them down, then summoned the villagers.

Now they were jabbering questions at him, in English, of course. He understood English, but he knew better than to reply. "Who are you? Were these men working under your orders? Where were you going with this truck?"

The Count smiled and shook his head. After a while they stopped, as he knew they would.

The Corporal turned to his companion. "Okay," he said. "Let's go." The other man nodded and climbed into the cab of the truck as the motor coughed into life. The Corporal moved to join him, then turned to Raymond.

"We're taking this across the river," he said. "Hang onto our friend, here—they'll be sending a guard detail for him within an hour."

Raymond nodded.

The truck drove off into the darkness.

And it *was* dark now—the moon had vanished behind a cloud. The Count's smile vanished, too, as he

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glanced around at his captors. A rabble of stupid clods, surly and ignorant. But armed. No chance of escaping. And they kept staring at him, and mumbling.

"Take him into the tomb."

It was Raymond who spoke, and they obeyed, prodding their captive forward with pitchforks. That was when the Count recognized the first faint ray of hope. For they prodded him most gingerly, no man coming close, and when he glared at them their eyes dropped.

They were putting him in the crypt because they were afraid of him. Now that the Americans were gone, they feared him once more—feared his presence and his power. After all, in their eyes he was a vampire—he might turn into a bat and vanish entirely. So they wanted him in the tomb for safekeeping.

The Count shrugged, smiled his most sinister smile, and bared his teeth. They shrank back as he entered the doorway. He turned, and on impulse, furled his cape. It was an instinctive final gesture, in keeping with his role—and it provoked the appropriate response. They moaned, and old Raymond crossed himself. It was better, in a way, than any applause.

In the darkness of the crypt the Count permitted himself to relax a trifle. He was offstage now. A pity he'd not been able to make his exit the way he'd planned, but such were the fortunes of war. Soon he'd be taken to the American headquarters and interrogated. Undoubtedly there would be some unpleasant moments, but the worst that could befall him was a few months in a prison camp. And even the Americans must bow to him in appreciation when they heard the story of his masterful deception.

It was dark in the crypt, and musty. The Count moved about restlessly. His knee grazed the edge of the empty coffin set on a trestle in the tomb. He shuddered involuntarily, loosening his cape at the throat. It would be good to remove it, good to be out of here, good to shed the role of vampire forever. He'd played it well, but now he was anxious to be gone.

There was a mumbling audible from outside, mingled with another and less identifiable noise—a scraping sound. The Count moved to the closed door of the crypt and listened intently; but now there was only silence.

What were the fools doing out there? He wished the Americans would hurry back. It was too hot in here. And why the sudden silence?

Perhaps they'd gone.

Yes. That was it. The Americans had told them to wait and guard him, but they were afraid. They really believed he was a vampire—old Raymond had convinced them of that. So they'd run off. They'd run off, and he was free, he could escape now—

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So the Count opened the door.

And he saw them then, saw them standing and waiting, old Raymond staring sternly for a moment before he moved forward. He was holding something in his hand, and the Count recognized it, remembering the scraping sound that he'd heard.

It was a long wooden stake with a sharp point.

Then he opened his mouth to scream, telling them it was only a trick, he was no vampire, they were a pack of superstitious fools—

But all the while they bore him back into the crypt, lifting him up and thrusting him into the open coffin, holding him there as the grim-faced Raymond raised the pointed stake above his heart.

It was only when the stake came down that he realized there's such a thing as playing a role too well.

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THE SPY WHO CAME OUT OF THE NIGHT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

COLONEL NELSON WAS IN CHARGE of the External Operations Branch of British Intelligence, and Rand was never happy to see him. The workings of the Department of Concealed Communications, even with the world supposedly at peace, took up all his days and many of his nights. A visit from Colonel Nelson might well mean some problem halfway round the globe, and more time lost from his desk.

"You need a vacation, Rand," Colonel Nelson told him, slipping into the leather chair he liked so well.

"Perhaps in the spring."

"Like to fly down to Switzerland for a few days?"

Rand gazed across his desk at the older man. "Do I have a choice?"

Colonel Nelson's smooth face crinkled into an attempt at a smile. "It's something only you can handle, Rand."

"Can't I handle it from here?"

"Frankly, no. One of the friendly European powers has requested someone. They need to intercept a message and decipher it on the spot. Minutes might be precious. You're the only one in Double-C who can do it."

Rand smiled with satisfaction, even though he didn't quite believe the words. "At least you have me interested. Tell me the rest of it."

"You know of Taz?"

"Of course." Rand sometimes felt that he knew Taz like a brother, even though he'd never even seen a picture of the man. Taz was his opposite on the Russian side, a shrouded question mark buried somewhere in a Kremlin office.

"Then you know he never leaves Moscow. We think he's probably

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old or crippled. Anyway, this man does his legwork for him." Colonel Nelson opened his folder. "Constantine Blakov."

"Blakov." Rand studied the large cardboard sheet that Nelson had passed to him. In one corner it bore a few words he couldn't understand, and the emblem of one of their European allies. The sheet held perhaps 20 candid photographs of a man, some in color, taken on Russian streets and in an unidentified office or apartment. He seemed a tall man, in his mid-thirties, with straight brown hair and a wine-colored birthmark along his left cheek. He had a pencil mustache, and in several of the pictures he was smiling. His teeth seemed too perfect to be real.

"Their man, Professor Trenton, brought me these. Trenton's here in London, and he has tickets for two on the flight to Berne."

"I know of Blakov," Rand said slowly. "He's been in London, on trade missions. I gather these photos were taken secretly by Professor Trenton's people."

"Quite correct."

"What's their interest in Blakov?"

"He too is making a trip to Berne tomorrow, on a most interesting mission." Colonel Nelson leaned back in the chair, like a man delivering a lecture. "As you probably know, one of the most famous spy schools in the world is located in the Red Chinese Embassy at Berne. They not only train agents, but they dispatch paymasters from there. The operation is under the nominal control of China's foreign espionage chief, Tsou Ta-Peng, but in actual practice it's run by a man in Berne named Lin Ching. Our information is that Blakov will meet Lin Ching, and Professor Trenton wants to witness that meeting."

"Interesting. But where do I fit in?"

"The Communist mind has an almost fanatical predilection for secrecy. Professor Trenton's government believes that Blakov is bringing with him a large quantity of money to be delivered to Russian agents by Lin Ching's courier system. Since they will not wish to be seen at each other's Embassy, a meeting place will no doubt be arranged somewhere in Berne or its outskirts."

"I didn't realize the Russians and Chinese were that friendly these days," Rand observed wryly.

"I believe the situation is fluid," Colonel Nelson replied. "In any event, Professor Trenton has arranged to intercept the message giving the time and place of the meeting. But he needs someone who is able to decode it on the spot. Simple?"

"Simple, if the cipher is one of their ordinary types. But can't Trenton just follow Blakov? Or Lin Ching?"

"Too risky. These men are the

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best in the business. They know too much about spotting a tail and losing it."

Rand acquiesced. "All right. When does the plane leave?"

Colonel Nelson smiled. "This afternoon. You're to meet Professor Trenton at the airport."

The afternoon was bright with the promise of spring, and the big commercial jet rose into the sky like a sudden swimmer splitting the blue in a perfect dive. The flight was a popular one, with all seats sold weeks in advance, and as Rand and Trenton boarded the plane, Rand barely noticed the man with the bandaged face who followed them.

Professor Trenton proved to be a slender man in later middle age. His features were of an uncertain European caste which could have been French or German or Italian, or a mixture of the three.

"Tell me a little about this courier system," Rand requested as the plane crossed the jagged coastline of France. They were seated in the rear compartment over drinks, well out of earshot of the other passengers.

"It is a very clever thing," Professor Trenton said, speaking English as if he had learned it only recently. "At any given moment the Red Chinese can deliver money or messages in person to a dozen cities in America or Britain or in my own country. And they do not even need visas to do this. In fact, they could place hundreds of Chinese agents in America at any given moment, legally, without violation of any law."

"How's that possible?" Rand asked, rather startled.

"They simply buy airline tickets on some flight that makes a refueling stop in America on the way to another country. Generally they are booked to Mexico City, but when the plane stops in New York they can get out and walk around in a restricted area without passing through customs. The money or message is passed to an airport employee, usually in the Men's Room. The method was used quite extensively during the Cuban troubles a few years back."

Rand nodded, lighting one of the American cigarettes he favored. "I can see the advantages over sending the money by mail or smuggling it in baggage. What happens then?"

"It is usually deposited in a joint bank account by the airport employee, under an assumed name. The Chinese or Russian agent simply comes along later and draws it out."

Rand finished his drink and decided against another. It was a short trip and they'd be landing soon. "What about this message? How will it be sent?"

"Lin Ching has a girl—she's British, I believe—who will contact Blakov. They do not trust her with the money itself, but she will have a message of some sort about a meeting. That is why we need you."

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An hour later, when the plane landed at an airport high among the Swiss Alps, a hundred miles from Berne, the man with the bandaged face followed them off.

They avoided the large hotels and stayed instead at a little *pension* away from the business district of Berne, a training school for hotel employees where the rates were cheap and government people were nowhere to be seen. It was a quaint place, filled with aging Swiss charm and with a panoramic view of the snowy mountains that surrounded the city. The guests were mostly vacationing skiers, who were out on the slopes early each morning and overlooked the often haphazard service.

Professor Trenton rented a little car the next morning, and they drove by the Red Chinese Embassy, a sprawling place with an iron gate in front. "They don't seem to be early risers," Rand observed.

"Then we will catch the worms, as you British say." Trenton was smiling; he seemed pleased with himself.

Back at the hotel, Rand noticed the man with the bandaged face pass them in the lobby, and he then remembered him from the plane. The man was tall and slim, with straight brown hair and a bandage that covered one eye and the left side of his face. He seemed to be on the same floor as Rand and Trenton, at the other end of the hall.

"That man was on the plane with us," Rand said.

Trenton glanced after the retreating back. "Was he? I didn't notice."

Rand took out a cigarette. "When do we make contact with the girl?"

"Blakov should arrive this noon. It will be soon after that."

Toward the middle of the afternoon the word came from Professor Trenton's men. "Blakov has arrived," Trenton said briskly, hanging up the telephone. "We move."

The girl was younger and prettier than Rand had expected. She had a vibrant manner that was disarming in the ski country, but somehow he knew she would have been the same strolling with the theater crowd in Piccadilly. When they first saw her, she was climbing into a compact British car bearing the legend *New China News Agency* on its doors.

"Lin Ching's couriers travel as representatives of NCNA," Trenton explained. "An effective cover, though it fools no one."

They followed the girl's car, staying well behind to avoid detection.

"We may lose her in the traffic," Rand said.

"It doesn't matter. We can intercept her."

"Who is she, anyway?"

"A British librarian named Rose Anter. She has been here for a year, working at the Chinese Embassy. The usual background—Communist Party, Ban-the-Bomb rallies in your country, finally a drift toward China

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because she felt that Moscow and Washington were getting too friendly. Some think she might be Lin Ching's mistress, but that is irrelevant. We need only know that she carries a sealed dispatch envelope for delivery to Blakov. It almost certainly contains a coded message setting up the time and place of the meeting."

"If they're using the diplomatic code—"

Professor Trenton nodded. "We have the diplomatic code. But we need you in the event it proves to be a cipher or something unusual. The Chinese mentality for puzzles, you know."

"How do we get it away from her?"

Professor Trenton explained in a few quiet words.

Near the Federal Assembly Building the little car of the *New China News Agency* suddenly pulled to the side of the street with a flat tire. The dark-haired girl hopped out and surveyed the damage, glancing down the street for the nearest service station.

"Can I help you, Miss?" Rand asked, stepping off the curb.

"You're English!" she exclaimed with a relieved smile. "I've had a puncture and there doesn't seem to be a station nearby." The Assembly Building stood at the edge of a bluff overlooking the winding sweep of the Aar River, and any help for Rose Anter's tire was a mile away, across the bridge.

"I can give you a lift, if you'd like," Rand offered. "I have a car back there."

She glanced at her watch. It was a few minutes after four, and the March sun was already low along the snowy Alps of the Bernese Oberland. "I'm in a great hurry," she said. "All right, drive me to a telephone, will you? And thanks."

"Certainly."

She lifted the dispatch envelope from the car seat, thought about it, and decided to take it with her. She was clutching it under her arm as she slid into the front seat next to Rand. "Are you visiting here?" she asked.

"Business. A trade delegation. I'm about to close a deal for a shipment of Swiss chocolate."

"A candy man! How fascinating!"

He smiled as they headed across the lofty bridge to the residential section of the city. "There should be a phone in that shop," he said.

She took the envelope with her to make the call, but there was no shelf for it in the phone booth. She looked around, uncertain, and then handed it to Rand. "Could you hold this while I phone?"

"Certainly."

The envelope was closed only by a metal clasp and a wax seal that had already worked itself partly loose from the paper. He heard her speaking in rapid French on the phone, and turned away from the booth.

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In an instant the flap opened under his prodding. The envelope held a number of routine documents and a second, smaller envelope with Blakov's name on it.

Rand looked inside at the brief message, then looked again to make certain he had seen it correctly.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing." He handed over the envelope. She checked the flap in a casual manner and put it under her arm once more.

"Thank you again for the ride," she told him. "You needn't wait any longer. Someone is picking me up."

"It's been a pleasure."

Rand left her at the shop and drove around the outskirts of the city by a circuitous route before recrossing the Aar and returning to the hotel. In the room Trenton was waiting.

"It was too easy," Rand told him. "She actually let me hold the envelope while she phoned."

The older man allowed himself a hint of a smile. "It cost us five thousand American dollars to let you hold that envelope, and then we were not sure she would go through with it."

"You mean she's one of your agents?"

"Not at all. Only a girl who needs money."

"I'll be damned!"

"What did the envelope contain?"

Rand sat down. "Some routine papers and a very brief message to Blakov. All it said was *Berne 0300.*"

At eight o'clock Professor Trenton was still pacing the floor, while Rand sat by the window, staring out at the lights of the old *Munster* tower that dominated the Berne skyline.

"You see, Rand, the message *must* be authentic," Trenton was saying. "My men say she was picked up by a Chinese and driven to the Russian Embassy where Blakov is staying."

"I don't think it's a code of any sort," Rand mused. "More likely it's a map location."

"Obviously. But we have checked every street map of Berne we could find. *0300* means nothing on any of them. And we have to know where they are meeting. We cannot hope to follow them to the place."

"It's not as if it were a cipher," Rand replied. "I can't sit down with paper and pencil."

"We *have* to know," Trenton repeated. "That is why we brought you here."

"Yes, yes." At nine o'clock Rand started pacing. "A time and a place, somewhere in this city . . ." He lit one of his American cigarettes. "*Berne 0300.*"

Professor Trenton returned from telephoning. "Blakov is still at the Embassy. There is still time."

"Time," Rand repeated.

"What?"

"Suppose *0300* was the time—three o'clock tomorrow morning."

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"Do you think it is?"

"A map coordinate wouldn't need that first zero. And we know the message must include a time. Three a.m."

"Six hours from now," Trenton muttered. "But *where?*"

"In Berne. The only other word of the message."

"But *where* in Berne? The City Hall? The airport? The tower?"

Rand ground out his cigarette. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Perhaps there was invisible writing on the paper."

"Then why wasn't the whole thing invisible? No, *Berne 0300* was the message, all right—the complete message."

"Berne . . . The Berne Hotel, perhaps?"

"Or—" Rand hesitated. "What if *Berne* didn't mean the city at all? What if it was just a word? *Berne*—the German word for *bear!*"

"Bear?"

"This city is named after a bear. Somewhere there must be a statue of one!" Rand was excited now, with a flushed sense of triumph. "Call your local people. Find out where the most famous bear in the city is located—a statue, a zoo, anything!"

Professor Trenton made the phone call and turned to Rand as he hung up. "You are correct, of course. Legend has it that the city was named for a bear killed on the spot by its founder. Since the year 1513 the city has maintained a famous bear pit just across the Nydeck bridge."

"A bear pit," Rand repeated. "That's the place, then. The bear pit, at three a.m."

Professor Trenton nodded. "I will get the car and pick you up in an hour."

Even in March the Berne nights were rarely freezing, and this night the temperature hovered in the low forties. The streets near the government buildings were deserted, for the night life of the city lay elsewhere.

Rand and Trenton crossed the high span of the Nydeck bridge just after midnight and turned right. The bear pit was situated at the end of the bridge itself, and as they passed the fenced enclosure, Rand wondered if bears slept at night. It was quiet now.

They returned around two to take up positions in a shadowed alley across the street from the silent bears. Beyond them, at their backs, the shops of the city gradually gave way to the residential section—first, blocks of older houses, and then, almost reluctantly, the newer homes of the postwar period. The city had never known the scars of London or Berlin, but postwar here had also been a time of rebuilding.

"An odd place for a meeting," Professor Trenton said. Rand felt him shiver a bit as the dampness of

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the night began to penetrate their coats.

"Not really, when you think about it. The meeting had to be at night, far from both Embassies. Lin Ching probably thought the bear pit would have special appeal to a Russian. Perhaps they've used it in the past." He wished he could risk a cigarette.

They waited in silence for a time, shifting feet in the chill darkness. At 2:40 one of the unseen bears roared in sudden disturbed anger. It had caught their scent, or perhaps only the glint of the moonlight on the side of the pit.

"I would not like being in there with them," Trenton observed.

Rand grunted. He was cold and tired. Perhaps no one would come after all. Perhaps he'd been wrong.

But at ten minutes to three a black car bearing diplomatic plates pulled up across the street, next to the pit. The driver remained inside, but a short Chinese climbed out to stretch his legs. He spoke a few words to the Chinese driver, lit a cigarette, and glanced at his watch. Familiar with the absence of traffic at this time of night, he made no effort to remain hidden.

This was Lin Ching, a small man with a hard, youthful face and deep-set eyes that Rand knew would be cold as ice. He'd reached the top in a dangerous profession, and he no longer had reason to fear men like Trenton who might lurk in alleys to watch. Perhaps he was thinking now of the agents he had trained and sent into the West. Berne was better than the rice paddies of Chungking, and tomorrow, he was convinced, could only be better than today.

Rand watched him strolling back and forth, a topcoat slung casually over his shoulders. At that moment he might have hated Lin Ching. An enemy—if any man was an enemy. But a friend—if all men were friends.

The restless bear roared again, and was then joined by another, filling the night with a promise of uncertainty. Nothing was sure at the bottom of the pit—nothing but the moon.

At exactly three o'clock a second car crossed the bridge. It slowed to a stop some distance behind Lin Ching's vehicle. There was only one man in it, and Rand recognized Constantine Blakov at once. He carried a brief case under one arm, and his straight brown hair seemed to catch and hold the moonlight. His left cheek was toward them, and they could see the wine-colored birthmark.

"Comrade Lin Ching," he said, speaking to the night.

"Comrade Blakov. You received my message."

"Certainly." They were both speaking Russian, quietly, but the voices carried in the night. Lin Ching's driver had turned in his seat to watch.

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"You have something for me?" Lin Ching asked.

"Yes. All the way from Moscow." The Russian unzipped his brief case as he spoke.

The bears roared again from the depth of their pit, and Rand missed the next words. He saw only the glint of metal as the brief case dropped away, and he realized in that instant what was happening. The Russian's hand held an awkward-looking weapon, a German machine-pistol that was like a cannon at such close range. There was a sudden chattering roar that blotted out the growling of the bears, and Lin Ching's chest and stomach seemed to fly apart.

Rand's hand went involuntarily before his face, to shield it, or to block out the sight. He started to move, but Trenton's grip was firm on his arm.

Blakov stepped over the body of the dead Chinese and raised the gun slowly toward the car and its driver. Already the car had started up, and it was in motion before the Russian could fire again, hitting only the tail light and rear window in an exploding shower of glass. Then the car was gone, out of range.

Blakov got into his own car and headed back across the bridge, leaving Lin Ching's body sprawled alone, above the roaring of the bears.

They heard in the morning that Constantine Blakov hadn't made it to the airport and his waiting plane outside Berne. The Chinese had caught him on the way and run his car into a ditch. As he had climbed from the flaming wreckage they'd shot him from the road.

"A bloody business," Professor Trenton said as they boarded the plane back to London. "Who would have thought something like this would come of it?"

They were sitting in the rear of the plane again, sipping cocktails as they climbed high above the snowy Alps. Spring was coming, but on the crest of these mountains it made no difference. There were places in the world where warmth never reached, where the thaw never came.

"It's a cruel life," Rand said, "for people like that."

Professor Trenton nodded, lighting his pipe. "Though I won't pretend my government is sorry to see Lin Ching gone. He was too close to our borders."

Until that moment Rand had intended to remain silent, because sometimes silence is the better way. But then the deep anger he'd felt all morning came over him again. "It must have taken a great deal of planning," he said, staring out the window at the billowing whiteness of the clouds.

"What?"

"Planning. I mean that was one of your agents disguised as Blakov who killed Lin Ching this morning. I mean the whole business has been a filthy plot from beginning to end.

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I mean I'm sick of all the killing, Professor Trenton."

They were silent for a long time after that, as the plane climbed beyond the clouds and the noonday sun blazed over all. Finally Professor Trenton asked, "How did you know, Rand? Did we make some mistake?"

"No mistake. It was perfect, until I started putting a few facts together. First, there was the man with the bandaged face who followed us onto the plane and to the hotel. The plane was booked to capacity weeks in advance, so I knew he didn't really follow us at all—he was traveling with us. And he was staying with us—with you—at the hotel."

"I couldn't tell you everything. We knew your government wouldn't have gone along with it."

"Damn right we wouldn't have! I should have realized it when you gave Colonel Nelson that pasted-up sheet of Blakov photos. You didn't need all those pictures for identification, but your make-up men needed that many. I remembered that the bandaged man had straight brown hair and was tall like Blakov. He even looked a bit like him, and of course the bandage covered the phoney birthmark."

Trenton sighed. "We couldn't just use make-up for the birthmark. The driver might have killed him on the spot and discovered it. We burned his face with a sunlamp, very carefully, so we had to hide it with the bandage. He's almost a perfect double—we only needed a bit of plastic surgery on the nose." He was talking rapidly, and his accent had all but disappeared.

"It fooled the Chinese in the dark, anyway," Rand admitted. "And that was what you wanted—not merely to kill Lin Ching, but to blame the Russians for it. The real Blakov would have made sure to kill the driver, too, but you had to let him escape, to report what he'd seen."

"They'll be at each other's throats now," Trenton said with satisfaction. "And your government will realize that we can be an important partner in the Alliance."

"You really think so, Trenton? You really think so?"

"The Chinese killed the real Blakov this morning, just as we knew they would. When he left the Embassy to keep his date with Lin Ching, we delayed him with a minor traffic accident—so our man could take his place. When Blakov realized what we'd done, he tried to flee."

"And if the Chinese hadn't killed him?"

"Then we would have," Trenton said with a shrug. "The necessity was to have Russian and Chinese agents killing each other."

Rand nodded. The fake Blakov would be safely away by now. "And we had to be present in case something went wrong. I should have realized there was something more

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to it when you paid the girl five thousand American dollars for such a simple thing. But it wasn't till you held me back that I knew you had expected the shooting. It took you an hour to get the car last night. That's when you told your bandaged agent about the meeting place and gave him final instructions."

"Yes."

"What if the girl talks?"

"The damage is already done. Your friend Taz in Moscow will want his revenge against the Chinese."

"You think you really achieved that much?" Rand asked.

"Of course. Mission accomplished. The Russians and the Chinese are now a little farther apart."

"It's not my kind of mission," Rand said, staring at the blue of the sky. "Counterintelligence is one thing—disrupting their missions, reading their messages, capturing their spies. But this is something else. This is assassination. This is aggression. Do you think that's the way toward real peace?"

"I never think about peace," Professor Trenton said.

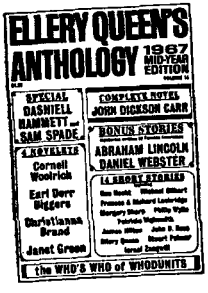
"No, I guess you don't."

"Say what you will. When they hear about it, London and Washington will commend my government."

"You're wrong, Trenton—or whatever your name is. There are still enough decent men left on our side. There are still some morals in the world, even in this rotten business."

But even as he spoke, Rand felt the fear grow within him. Were there enough decent men, enough to balance the ones like Trenton? His anger was still there, but now he was frightened.

Terribly frightened.



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Cody Pym had invested six months of hard work and deprivation and isolated in this hymn-singing, Bible-quoting mountain country—all to get his hands on the old man's wealth; but all Cody got for his trouble were some worthless land and a dilapidated cabin and some ancient trees with trunks so thick and gnarled that they looked almost obscene. And besides, there was always the nagging and uneasy twinge that the Sheriff suspected the truth . . .

THE TROUBLE OF MURDER

by JACQUELINE CUTLIP

CODY PYM CAME BACK FROM HIS uncle's funeral and sat by a window, drinking steadily and surveying his inheritance with a sour vengeance that grew with every drink. At any minute a bunch of nosy biddies from town might slip in, carrying their platters of greasy fried chicken and saying how sad it was and how much everyone would miss poor Josh. Yet he couldn't bring himself to release the bottle of gin. It thawed his fingers and throat, and was beginning to pull a merciful glaze across the debilitating events of the afternoon.

The burying part was worse than he'd expected, although not as bad as what came after. Stanton stood there like a dolt, teetering back and forth, his fat shoulders hunched against the brittle March air; and Dorrie kept sniffling wetly into her gloves. Watching them, Cody assumed a mask of decent sobriety that did not come easily, wondering only how long it would take to collect his share of the money and get out of these dreary Godforsaken hills.

He hadn't expected the old man to have so many friends. At least 50 people circled the rectangle of raw dirt in the little churchyard, their gazes fixed somberly on the whipping canopy and the trembling baskets of flowers. But Cody recalled with an uneasy twinge that the Sheriff's eyes, cold and hooded, were on him. Not once, and not coincidentally. Sheriff Hughes was staring at him without a trace of embarrassment, almost as if he knew something.

It was a relief when the Sheriff stepped back into the crowd and disappeared the moment the service was over.

As soon as Cody came in he had built a fire, and the globular iron stove bloomed redly, throwing the bare single room into sharp ugly angles. The heat retrieved all the invalid smells of the dead man—

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spilled medicines and unwashed stale blankets, musty putrescent smells that would linger until it was warm enough to throw open the place to the cleansing winds of spring.

"The devil," he said suddenly. "The devious old devil. I should have killed him the day I came."

Too late he realized he had spoken aloud, that Hughes or one of the other yokels might be right outside the door. He listened carefully, hearing nothing but the fire. Through the window, against an ashen sky, there was only the endless hills stretching bleakly to the horizon. And the damnable trees.

"Seventy trees," he said. During the long walk up the spiraling trail his rage had collapsed, subsiding into a shocked acceptance of what had happened. They were not, he decided with a curious detachment, what one would consider nice trees. Not like willows or maples. The trunks were enormous, so thick and gnarled that there was something obscene about them. Now, as they waited on their slope dreaming of April, the naked branches reminded him of blackened bones.

"Seventy trees and a crummy old shack—the sum of six month's work."

Being neither superstitious nor religious, the idea of it all amounting to retribution didn't once cross his mind. He knew he might sell the cabin for maybe a thousand to someone who wanted a summer place. It was poorly constructed, and wouldn't bear close inspection. The old miser had built it himself after his wife died and he'd left the big house in the valley. Some neighbors had helped, and in Cody's opinion they'd been no better carpenters than his uncle. The heavy exposed beams were not symmetrical, giving the room a lopsided, rakish appearance, and rain had a sly way of sifting through the cracks. Still, city people could be such fools.

A thousand then, if he was lucky. The land which held the trees was steep, untillable, and therefore worthless. So a thousand it would have to be. Not enough to pay the IOUs held by Tollini. Scarcely enough to have gone to the trouble of murder.

He turned broodingly to look upon what he had been avoiding since the moment he sat down. Far below, strung like green jewels across the valley, were the solitary farms of the people he had seen at the funeral. His vision rocked and swayed a little, and then clamped on what he'd been seeking.

It lay there, white and serene on its rich river acres, with the blankness that is peculiar to all empty houses. Cody knew it wouldn't be like that a month from now. Once Stanton and Dorrie were married they would move in, and he would be forced to watch it stir and come to life. Like a foretaste of the future he could almost see smoke coiling

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cozily up from the chimney, Dorrie hanging clothes on the line, lights going on at twilight and, worse, going off again. Everything reminding him that rightfully it should be *his* supper that Dorrie put on the table, *his* clothes on the line.

"What's it worth?" he'd once asked his uncle.

"The big place? Twenty thousand, at least." The old man grinned, knowing full well why Cody had asked. "I could sell it tomorrow, but I won't. Everything goes to you and Stanton."

Liar, Cody thought wearily; for Stanton had got everything—including Dorrie.

He tried to remember the last time he'd seen her, put his cheek against the hair that was the color of a rubbed chestnut. His memory was murky. All he could bring back was her white face as she stood there in the dim hallway of the boarding house where she lived.

"You know I love you, Cody," she said, not meeting his eyes and keeping her arms close to her sides.

"All right, then," he said, thinking how easy it had been to get her away from Stanton. "There's nothing to keep us from getting married."

"I'd never marry you, Cody."

He stared at her. She went on like a horse that has taken the final hurdle and is at last free to gallop down the straight.

"You drink too much. I'm just a dumb waitress, but I'm smart enough to know I couldn't change you."

"Now wait a minute, Dorrie."

"My Pa was a drinking man. I watched my brothers go hungry because of it. I watched a nice farm get sold off in parcels to pay his debts. I saw my Ma die at forty from overwork and a broken heart."

She looked at him then, and he saw it was useless; she was far wiser and stronger than he'd ever be. "I vowed I'd never stand what she had to," she said quietly. "Besides, love's just a word."

"Dorrie," he begged.

She faltered, and then caught herself.

"We oughtn't to see each other any more." She opened the door to her room, and there was something final and decisive about the gesture. "Stanton still wants me to marry him. If I do, you'll be welcome in our house. After all, you're kin."

The door slammed, ending it, and he stood alone in stunned disbelief. Thin-lipped and black-angry, he had gone straight to Grout's, a bootlegger who imported his wares from a nearby county in a derelict taxi cab. Going back up the trail, his jacket snug with bottles, Cody convinced himself that once he had the money, Dorrie would come running back. At that time he was still certain about inheriting the money.

He was certain right up until the last. Until, in fact, right after the

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funeral when the hick lawyer motioned to Stanton and him and took the two of them to his office for the reading of the will. Cody was so sure of everything that he barely listened to the dry preliminaries, studying Stanton just for the hell of it, wondering for the thousandth time what Dorrie could see in him. In his badly fitting mail-order suit, with his chubby fingers laced together, he looked like a good little boy who had always obeyed and was now waiting to reap the benefits of that obedience.

Well, reap he had. As the words penetrated to Cody, making it plain that the farm had gone outright to Stanton, leaving him with nothing but the trees and the cabin, he was consumed with a white-hot fury. It took him a while to realize that the thing which bothered him most was that neither the shyster nor his cousin seemed disconcerted by the appalling inequality of it all. They both had the gall to shake his inert hand, and Stanton, who with all his shortcomings had never before been vindictive, said, "I'm glad it turned out this way, Cody. Uncle Josh always claimed I was the farmer in the family, and you and them trees will get along fine."

Now, melted into a torpor by the liquor, he could almost laugh. And because he was a gambler, he could look upon it as just another bad hand. He'd lost, in much the same way he had lost in Tollini's back room.

The murder had been a gamble too; paradoxically, he had won there. No matter what suspicions Sheriff Hughes nurtured, he couldn't prove a thing. It had gone so simply, been so predestined, that if it weren't for the money, Josh Pym's death wouldn't have been given a second thought.

It was never quite clear to Cody just how this wealth had been acquired. His own side of the family had fled the barrenness of the mountains while he was still a child, yet he was unable to forget their awestruck faces and glittering eyes when they spoke of the old man. It was not until they and the rest of the Pyms were planted up where they'd been this afternoon, and there was no one left but Stanton and him, that the possibility of obtaining the money became a tantalizing likelihood.

He was a stockroom clerk for a department store in Richmond, neither liking nor disliking the work, but enduring it because nothing was required of him. It enabled him to eat a little, drink more, and gamble when he felt the urge. Women had never been a problem. With his dark, whiplike good looks they were always there. Until the approach of his thirtieth birthday he had been, if not happy, reasonably satisfied with his lot. Then, like the beginning menopausal pangs of a spinster, disquieting thoughts assailed him. It was the certainty that he possessed all he was ever to have.

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This was it. There would be no sudden adventures, no riches, no heartwrenching romantic affairs. The discovery was like the first gray storms of autumn, numbing more than the flesh.

A short time later, through a brief and quite accidental encounter with a traveling salesman in a bar, he learned that Josh Pym was ailing, that there was no one to look after him. His cousin Stanton, whom he remembered as a pasty-skinned do-gooder who never missed a Wednesday-night prayer meeting, now made his living selling tractors. The traveling salesman, once primed, revealed that Stanton, an acquaintance, was still a bachelor. He stayed down in the town and didn't see his uncle often.

Cody considered this information reflectively. The following weekend he quietly left his job, packed his meager belongings, and with a one-way ticket in his pocket, boarded a bus for the hills he hadn't seen since he was seven years old.

If Josh Pym suspected there was more to his nephew's unexpected visit than a sentimental journey he did not speak of it, not even when it lengthened into weeks. He was sick, and he was aware there wasn't much time left. While the imminence of death itself was not totally unwelcome, he cringed at the idea of a solitary final suffering. He could picture himself stricken, lying on the floor for days as life inched from him, and it filled him with a nameless, intolerable dread. This Cody, whatever his reasons for being here, was a gift from heaven.

Cody, observing the yellowish skin stretched tightly over the old man's frail frame, figured a couple of months would do it, maybe less. He was fully prepared for the isolation and deprivations. After all, the old man was 80. Murder, if it occurred to Cody at all, was only a shadow flirting on the edges of his mind.

"Don't you worry, Uncle," he would say heartily, remembering the pills, doing the wash, splitting the kindling. "I'm going to take *good* care of you."

So, with the worst of his fears at rest, the invalid began to wax.

Cody watched this flourishing in fascinated apprehension. Three months came and went. There was plenty of work, and his days were filled. Occasionally the monotony was broken by Stanton, whom he suffered with conflicting emotions, resentment predominant.

Now and then Cody allowed himself an hour or so in town, but the lure of Grout's was too dangerous and he soon gave it up. He didn't want Josh Pym to know about the drinking; this was hymn-singing, Bible-quoting country, and Cody had not been absent from it long enough to forget that here alcohol was considered one of the seven abominations.

At first he scarcely missed it, for through Stanton he had met Dorrie.

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She worked in a restaurant near the Post Office, and each time he went for the mail he made a point of stopping there for coffee. It didn't trouble him that he was encroaching on his cousin's territory; he knew only that the days he saw her ran like bright threads through the drabness of his existence.

But he had lived too long in the city, and after a while even Dorrie proved insufficient.

When the stars began their march in from the east, and shadows streaked across the purple hills, he was beset with a nagging restlessness. He longed for the anonymity of streets hung with neon, places where a man could step across a threshold and shed loneliness like a wet coat. It was this homesickness, this need, which compelled him one Saturday night to hire Grout to take him to a roadhouse 50 miles away, where he managed to lose $3000 he didn't have to an apple-cheeked bandit who wore a diamond ring on his thumb and a .38 against his shoulder.

Only the impeccable county-wide reputation of Josh Pym saved him, bought him time, and he knew it. Tollini was lenient; he would give him a month. Looking back into those narrow Sicilian eyes, Cody realized he wouldn't get a minute more. He would have to give fate a shove.

Two days later the old man had a stroke, and Cody felt a momentary, violent surge of hope. His uncle had gone to the creek for water and stayed too long. When Cody found him, his head cradled on a bed of moss and his booted feet submerged, the old man's leathery face was already the color of ashes.

Gazing down at him, Cody saw how easy it would be to end it right there. All he had to do was put the head where the boots were and run for a doctor. Yet for some intuitive reason he didn't. For one thing, each afternoon about this hour the big Sheriff came moseying up the trail. Hughes claimed he did it from habit; he and Josh had been friends for years, and he had grown accustomed to checking on him since his illness.

This may have been true. Still, each time Hughes looked at him, Cody had the uncomfortable feeling that not only was every detail of his appearance being assessed, but something of his thoughts as well. So instead of shoving the grizzled head into the water and holding it there, he lifted the limp fragile body and carried it back to the cabin.

He was two hours finding a doctor willing to make the steep ascent on foot, and as he followed behind the twitchy overworked man who had finally agreed to go solely because it was Josh Pym who needed him, Cody felt reasonably certain it would be finished by the time they got there.

Incredibly, the old man was still alive, blue and mottled, gasping like a fish out of water.

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"This is bad," the doctor said when he had done all he could and was getting ready to leave. "Paralysis of one side, speech impeded. He ought to be in the hospital, but the trip down might kill him. It's a good thing you're here to care for him."

Tentatively, with just the right degree of fearful concern, Cody tried to pry out of him how much longer it would be.

"Don't hope for much. He could linger for a year, or he might go tomorrow."

So Cody dutifully lived out the tomorrows, ticking them off mentally, willing to give ten, perhaps fourteen. Nature would take its course; it *had* to. By the end of the week the old man's color improved and he made testy indications that he wanted to sit up. Cody, staggered by this turn, spoon-fed him, bathed him, translated the incoherent orders that issued from the slack lips, and on the fourteenth day he killed him.

The murder was child's play. When Cody reflected on the ease with which it was done, he was amazed that someone hadn't thought of it before. Given time and opportunity, an entire family could be wiped out and no one would be the wiser.

Now, just thinking about it, Cody laughed. He couldn't help himself; the laughter erupted from him in great swells of sound, for a new plan had come to him. He would kill Stanton the same way he had killed his uncle.

He was still laughing when he heard the sibilance of the door opening, felt the whisper of danger in his bones, and whirled to see a man silhouetted against the evening sky.

"Celebrating?" the Sheriff asked, closing the door behind him. "Or just making up for lost time."

Cody was so relieved he decided to smile. "Sit down," he said amiably.

Hughes remained standing, his hands deep in the pockets of his uniform. Cody took note of this small rebellion, and it worried him.

"There's a couple of men in town looking for you," Hughes said, glancing about him. "I figured I better let you know. Thought you might want to be sober when you talked to them."

Fear lanced through Cody. Tollini's men. They had come to kill him. But there was another week left of the month he'd been given. Surely they wouldn't do it before then. Unless, a mocking imp at the back of his brain reminded, they knew about the will.

"What do they look like?"

"Ordinary men. Dark clothes. Both carrying satchels."

Warmth fled, and icy terror rested like a malignant lump in Cody's stomach. "What could they want with me?"

Hughes was wandering about the room, touching things with his huge hands. Once his eyes flicked

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upward toward the beamed ceiling, and for a moment Cody's heart almost stopped.

"Never asked. No reason to. Most likely it's someone you knew in the city."

"No." All Cdy's dread splashed over in the single word. Hughes gave him a peculiar smile and kept pacing.

"You killed him." The sentence fell with such soft, chilling weight that Cody was jarred into silence. "I'm not sure how, but you killed Josh."

"Prove it."

Again the disquieting smile. "I can't. Not yet."

Something, a prick of anger perhaps, passing for courage, forced Cody to pull himself together. He new that he was being baited, that he must control himself. "Then don't repeat it," he said. "I could cause you trouble."

"No doubt you could." Hughes was peering into corners, studying the bed, the stove, and always the beamed ceiling. "We have a law here, son. An awful law, come to think of it."

"What law is that?" Cody asked agreeably. He was beginning to ease out of the whistling ring of danger. Thanks to this hick, there would be plenty of time to escape from Tollini's men. Up the mountain a couple of miles was a cave, its opening tangled with laurel and sumac. He could hide there for weeks if it came to that.

"It isn't a state law, but we've got a lot of respect for it. 'He that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword.' "

Cody laughed, and it was the wrong thing to do. Hughes came to stand before him, and there was a glint of madness in the flinty eyes. "It's from the Bible, Pym. It means that we all reap what we sow."

"Get out, Hughes." Cody's mouth held a bitter molten taste and the gin was a furnace roaring in his stomach. "I've had a rough day and I can't stand any more preaching."

"I'm going. But if I were you I'd sober up and try to get a good night's sleep."

"Why?"

"One of those men is coming up here first thing in the morning. He said to tell you he hated to intrude at a time like this, with you in mourning and all, but he's got no choice."

There was subtle triumph in the words, Cody was sure of it; somehow Hughes had found out about Tollini and was gloating about it.

"He'll be coming up the trail along about daybreak," the Sheriff added.

Cody watched as Hughes disappeared around the first turn, and then he was seized with dizziness. The old buzzard meant to sit in his office, feet on his desk, chewing on a toothpick, knowing full well that death in a black Sunday suit was perhaps even now checking his Luger or switchblade or whatever

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it was going to be, and calmly packing it into his little satchel.

Hughes *knew* he'd killed the old man, and this was his way of getting even. He'd been tried and convicted, and at dawn the sentence would be carried out.

Cody grabbed the bottle. It was empty, but there were more bottles hidden beneath his cot. He'd take that and enough food to tide him over until he could kill a grouse or a rabbit.

Thoughts of the cave loomed pleasantly before him—safe, dark, womb-like. If he started now, he'd be there by moonup.

Slowly he replaced the bottle on the table. Something was scraping gently at the window. It was the sound that ivy made, teasing and scratching with every breath of wind. And while a bright silvery wind had sprung up, Cody knew there was no ivy on the cabin walls.

He sat down heavily, some atavistic memory warning him to remain still until he was sure from which direction the danger threatened. He could not bring himself to believe it was his uncle out there, restlessly prowling from his fresh grave and eager to punish. Cody was drunk, but he knew better than that.

Still the sound went on, like the drumming of a beak, or the fingers of a frail groping hand.

A thick band of nausea girdled his chest. There was only one answer. Tollini's men had not waited for morning; they were outside, trying to lure him into the open.

With a quietness born of desperation Cody eased from the chair and glided to the wall where the shotgun hung. He had handled it before, shooting at an occasional squirrel, and knew its ancient mechanics. Loading it, he felt a sense of irrevocability, of doom. Surprisingly, he also felt relieved.

He could not have borne a confrontation with the accusing specter of Josh Pym, but flesh and blood he could deal with. If he killed Tollini's emissaries it would be the second time in three days that he had got away with murder. And Hughes couldn't touch him. Hughes would have to stand by and grit his teeth.

An early dusk had fallen sweetly and quietly over the hills. In the distance the sky was milky and trembling with rushing bits of ragged clouds, but the room was in darkness. Cody knew he couldn't be seen unless he lit a lamp. Like a fluid shadow he made his way to the door, cradling the gun, his finger nuzzling the trigger.

Stepping into the deepening twilight where no bird sang, he kept close to the rough sides of the cabin, familiar with every stone beneath his feet. The men, wherever they were, would be forced to grope. If they were foolhardy enough to have taken to the trees, they wouldn't dare go too far into the black void.

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Even Cody himself had never done that.

No, the men would be hill-shy. They would stay in the open, be easy to spot, easy to kill.

Cody made a tight searching circle, his breath clogged in his throat, ready at any movement to pull the trigger. Had a twig snapped, an errant breeze brushed his cheek, he would have shot.

Back to where he began, he realized his quarry had either retreated down the trail or entered the cabin while he was on the other side. This last thought was gripping him when he heard the sound again, directly above him.

The hair on the nape of his neck stiffened, and his feet seemed glued to the ground. He had forgotten the low roof. One of them was up there, smiling his shark's smile, drawing him leisurely into his sights. Like a tableau from a nightmare the moon started to slide out from behind the clouds.

It was like being in a spotlight, rendering him small and defenseless and horribly afraid. Balanced on the brilliant sword-edge of death, he was frozen into immobility. In one split second he could almost feel his head shatter, hear his blood splash the walls of the cabin, and with that final, ultimate heartbeat he managed to look up.

The roof sloped emptily, its grayed old shingles glittering in the silvered wash of moonlight. Nothing. Then Cody caught sight of his tormentor, and was instantly seized by a fierce, maniacal fury.

It was the trees again, taunting him. Those damnable trees!

A dead limb, broken but not yet freed of its moorings, bowed and swayed with each pulsing of the wind. Its branches splayed out like bony fingers, pattering an irregular tattoo.

Cody stood trance-like, numbed by rage and relief. He was not an eloquent man, but he knew that the trees were his own private Minotaur, his nemesis. He stared across the dark sifting mass with such savage hatred that his body rocked with it. Finally, with a sense of surprise that he hadn't thought of it before, he realized there was one last thing he must do before he left for the cave.

Inside he worked quickly, gathering all the essentials for what lay ahead. Kneeling beside the cot, he had another bad moment. The gin was no longer there. Frantically he took his arm and swept the small space where he had hidden it. It was gone, and with the knowledge came fear. And hard on its heels came anger.

Sober up, Hughes had said, touching things, picking them up, putting them down. Somehow, Cody thought hopelessly, he'd picked up two bottles of gin. It didn't matter, he decided; he'd make it through a couple of days, and then he'd sneak down to Grout's.

When he got up, his head felt

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clearer, and the sense of urgency had deserted him. There were almost ten hours before daybreak. He had plenty of time to sleep. He fell across the cot, unable to wring any more endurance from the long day, and when he wakened the birds were making fussy hungry noises.

He got up quickly and strapped the canvas knapsack on his back. In spite of the weight he felt a curious buoyancy.

Let Tollini's assassins come. Let Hughes come. They would find no grist for their mills.

When he closed the door behind him, he carried the shotgun in one hand and the kerosene lamp in the other. Walking directly to the edge of the woods, he halted. Beneath his boots was a cushiony carpet of rotted twigs and brown moldering leaves. Here and there, nestled among the hulking trunks, grew small clumps of pine.

Recklessly Cody yanked out the pine until a sizable mound was heaped before him and then stood panting, surrounded by a fresh threat. There was a stirring around him, like the low sighing of a hundred grieving voices. The trees, he realized suddenly, trying to trick him again.

He laughed, a dry desolate sound that the wind-ridden air cracked and carried away in fragments. With a peculiar surge of joy he smashed the kerosene lamp against a rock and felt the oil gush through his fingers and onto the tinder.

He threw the lit match and jumped, for he had seen pine burn before. It leaped outward and upward, an iridescent green sheet in the paling night. There was a vicious snapping as the fire caught and burrowed into the lethal leaves. He watched until he saw it snake eagerly through the woods, and then he turned to the opposite hillside where the cave and safety lay.

"Pym, wait!"

The words were flung out of the murkiness, from the direction of the trail. He stopped in his tracks and listened.

"Pym, for God's sake!"

The glow of the fire was everywhere now, and the radiance of noon hung over the trail. When the man stumbled into sight, Cody's first thought was that he had never seen anyone less menacing. Stout, bald, sixtyish, the stranger reached level ground in a drunken lurch.

Cody saw that he carried the telltale satchel, and a nervous prickling went up his spine. Tollini was shrewd. It would be like him to choose this harried, innocuous-looking jackass as his executioner. But where was the other one?

Slowly Cody lifted the gun to his shoulder. He wanted the killer to see him, to taste the gorge of fear. "Over here," he called, but the man ignored him. He stood like a begging supplicant before the blazing trees, and the stark anguish on his round sweating face startled Cody.

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"What have you done? What have you *done?*"

It was a despairing moan, rising weirdly above the crackling of the flames. Like a grotesque sawdust doll the stranger slumped to the ground in a big untidy heap, hugging his knees and rocking back and forth.

Cody watched in disbelief, his vision hazed by smoke and pain. The onslaught of the gin was beginning to hit him, and he had a searing headache. With a kind of horror he saw that the stranger was crying.

Too stunned to think, Cody started toward the hunched figure. A familiar voice, honed to the fineness of a scalpel, spoke in his ear.

"Not another step, Pym."

"Is it all right if I turn around?"

"Do that," Hughes said softly. "I want to see your face when I tell you I know now how you killed Josh."

Cody laughed, but when he turned he knew the truth. Hughes's impassive eyes stared back into his own, and seeing the twin reflections of a fiery hell mirrored there, an uncontrollable shudder ran through him.

"I knew you did it," Hughes said. "The minute I heard he was dead, I knew you'd done it."

"He had a bad heart." Cody's smile was strained.

"Lucky for you. I'll always wonder how you would have managed if he didn't have a bad heart."

Steady, steady, Cody ordered himself. He slipped the pack from his back, waiting.

"After the funeral, while you were at the lawyer's, I came up here," Hughes went on. Deep lines seamed his forehead. Cody thought he looked like old bear dogs he had seen—battle-scarred, bone-weary, yet unremitting until their prey was cornered. "I helped Josh build the cabin. I worked on it with my own hands." The red eyes narrowed into slits. "I put those beams up, and when I was finished I knew every splinter in them."

Cody set his teeth against the sick pounding in his skull and kept silent.

"I found that groove across the middle beam, Pym. Not deep, but deep enough. Just the kind of groove a heavy rope would make if it was hoisted across it with, say, a weight on the bottom."

"You're crazy!" Cody lashed out, his voice raw in spite of his caution. "There wasn't a mark on him."

"I know there wasn't. I made sure of it." Hughes's thumb kept fondling the handle of his revolver, and Cody knew suddenly that it was here the danger had lain all the time. Tollini's vengeance was a puny thing before this man's hatred. Hughes wanted blood for blood.

"You see, Josh was afraid of dying slow. If you'd shot him, or used a quick poison, I might feel more charitable. But I mean to see that you pay dearly, Pym, not so much

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because you murdered him, but *how* you murdered him."

"You'll never prove it."

The words came out weakly, ineffectually. Cody had gone limp with shock.

"I know that. A bitty little groove in a piece of wood isn't enough evidence for a jury." Hughes gazed at him with weary contempt. "I've watched you commit both murder and arson, yet come sunrise you'll walk off this mountain, catch a bus for the city, and I won't be able to lay a finger on you."

Cody's breath slammed back. He felt like a mole flushed from its nest, half dazed and blind, but he wasn't shaking any more. One drink, and he would be good as new. He had to get to Grout's. "Look," he began. "You can't keep me here."

"I don't aim to," Hughes said. "I just want to get a few things straight, so I won't spend the rest of my days wondering. I know how you took Josh from his bed and trussed his ankles together with a rope. I know how you hung him upside down from that beam until he had another stroke. But how *long* did it take, Pym? Twenty minutes? An hour?"

Cody couldn't answer. He had, in truth, barely got the old man back on the bed before the terrible wheezing ceased. It was odd how fast the terror had eased from the wrinkled features. He'd looked peaceful, lying there with his scrawny hands crossed, almost as if the sleep he'd been dreading had turned out better than he'd expected.

"You're a fool, Pym. Any mountain boy with a whittling knife could have told you that pine is soft, that the rope would leave its mark."

Hughes's attention strayed to the stranger who had got to his feet and was lumbering toward them. Accusation and despair fought for possession of what might ordinarily have been a pleasant face.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mack," Hughes said with a courteous solicitude. "I know how set you were on getting those trees. Can any of them be saved?"

"Not by my company. Not by anyone." The stranger seemed unable or unwilling to wrench his gaze from Cody. "Four hundred years old. Here long before the Powhatans. The finest stand of virgin black walnut I've ever seen in my life."

Cody made an inarticulate sound and Hughes's thin lips parted in a mirthless smile.

"Mr. Mack's been hounding Josh for thirty years, trying to get that lumber for his furniture factory in North Carolina. Josh couldn't bear to see it cut while he was still alive." He paused, and the terrible smile vanished. "I reckon he knew you'd sell it fast enough once he was gone. A month or so back he sent Mack a letter, telling him it wouldn't be long."

"I would have paid anything,"

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Mack said, still in the tones of someone fighting his way clear of a bad dream. "There's not much black walnut left, and none to compare with this."

"How much?" Cody rasped out the question. The stranger studied him with a faint air of surprise.

"Thirty, possibly forty thousand, cut into veneer. The market is going up each day."

A fortune, Cody thought dully; he'd destroyed a fortune. He had a wild impulse to laugh, and restrained himself. Hughes had put the gun back in its holster, but there was a curious, listening expression on his face. Cody didn't like it. Bear dogs like Hughes didn't give up so easily.

No matter, he told himself. In three hours he would be on his way out, no richer and no poorer than he had been that autumn day six months ago. Maybe he would try California. Tollini could never touch him there. Any place away from the grim jail of the hills, any place where the streets were sticky with the perfume of women, where a man could sit and drink his life away.

The inside of his mouth felt as dry and charred as the trees. Surely Grout would be up by now.

"You're right, Hughes," he said with a trace of his old cockiness. "I'm going to be on that nine o'clock bus, thumbing my nose at you and the rest of the yokels as it pulls away."

He waited for the slow, impotent fury to suffuse the weathered face. It didn't come, and its absence frightened Cody more than any violence. He whirled, an inexplicable pain racing through him, and hurried down the trail.

The two men looked after him. Cups of night were held in some of the hollows, but in the east the sun was inching across the hills.

"I couldn't help overhearing," Mack said at last. "Is it true? Did he really kill Josh?"

"He killed him," Hughes said briefly. "I found bits of rope in the ash pan of his stove, and there were places on Josh's boots where the rope rubbed."

Mack stared at him in bewilderment.

"But you let him go! Any jury in the land would consider that sufficient evidence."

"Sufficient for what?" Hughes's voice was like a tight spring. "Sufficient for parole in seven years? Our last legislature outlawed capital punishment, Mack, and Pym's debt is a heavy one. He'll pay, and it won't be in pennies."

They walked in silence to the trail, turning at the bend to look one last time at the dirty coils of smoke hanging above the ruined trees like half-hearted ghosts.

"It's funny, Hughes," Mack said thoughtfully. "I waited half my life for those trees. When I read about Josh's death, I dropped everything and drove like a lunatic for five hundred miles. All I could think of

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was that someone else would get to this young Pym before I did and steal them from me." His mouth twisted bleakly. "That other man I saw in the restaurant—I was sure he was after them. He kept asking the waitress questions about Pym. It upset me so I left the hotel while it was still dark, trying to beat him up here."

"You needn't have," Hughes said. "I don't think he was interested in the trees."

"Maybe not, but he was certainly interested in Pym. Wanting to sell him something, I suppose."

"Most likely." The alert, watchful quality still clung to Hughes. Yet when the rifle shot sang out, somewhere below them, they both jumped.

"A little late for deer hunting, isn't it?" Mack asked uneasily.

"There's always poachers. Nothing you can do about them. By the time you get to where they were, they're clean across some other ridge."

Hughes took a deep chestful of the brilliant air. The sky seemed pinker, closer to the earth, and their footsteps were stirring up hidden scents of spring. "Purely dangerous though. One of those bullets could hit someone going down the trail."

"Shouldn't we wait a few minutes?" Mack asked cautiously.

Hughes didn't break stride. "No need, Mack. Come on. It's going to be a fine day. Reminds me of something I read the other night. 'When you have ceased to destroy, you will be destroyed; and when you have made an end of dealing treacherously, you will be dealt with treacherously.'"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Mack said, treading heavily behind. "I don't get the connection."

"Forget it," Hughes said. "It just seemed to fit."

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MEMOIRS OF A MYSTERY CRITIC

by LENORE GLEN OFFORD

There's a governess, frightened and friendless;
The perils about her are endless.
The Master's romantic and thrillin'
But she fears that he may be the villain . . .

Someone planted a corpse in the foyer.
Disbelieved by police and his lawyer,
And dismayed by his enemy's cunning,
He must find the real culprit while running . . .

"You'll be dropped at the edge of the Curtain;
There'll be no help from us, that is certain.
Get the papers, but watch the Professor,
He murdered your young predecessor . . ."

"I've a plan to defraud the Prudential.
A dead body, of course, is essential.
Or, to satisfy all of my cravings,
I'll safely hold up the First Savings . . ."

Unravel the code or the world will explode . . .
The blonde lying dead in the private eye's bed . . .
The amateur solvers . . . the hoods with revolvers . . .
Pa killed for his pile . . . the surprise at the trial . . .
The sinister stranger . . . young beauty in danger . . .
The room that is locked . . . the adventurer socked . . .

The top-secret labs . . . the pursuers in cabs . . .
The hero impugned . . . the party marooned . . .
The bosoms, the brandy . . . the cyanide candy . . .
The hidden defectors . . . the lies to Inspectors . . .
Home life of a cop . . . and the Man at the Top . . .

By now, for these plots
I could fill in the dots
With one hand behind me
And a blindfold to blind me.
And yet I keep reading them,
Greedily needing them.
Don't think of stinting them,
Just keep on printing them!

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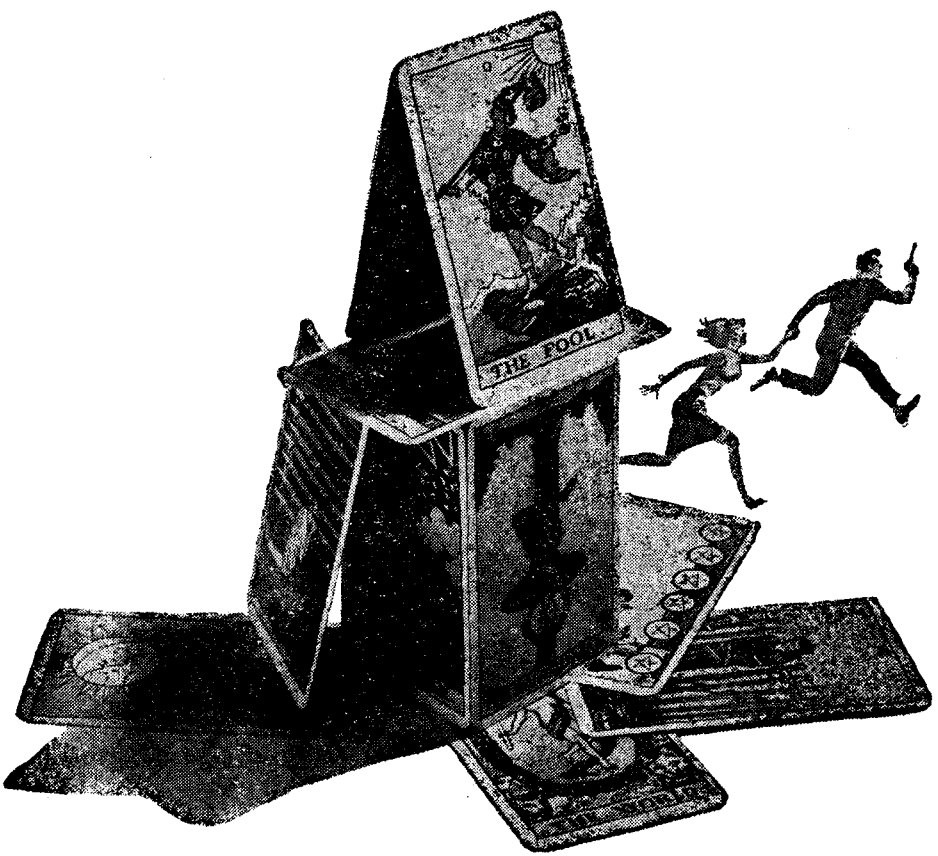

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Julian Symons' remarkable A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF CRIME (Crown, $10) merits more notice here than the brief listing in last month's Best-of-1966. Mr. Symons' taste, insight and skill enable him to cover, in something like 80,000 words and 750 pictures, the criminal history of the past 13 decades, from developments in criminalistics and penology to acute brief sketches of eminent murderers. A basic book for the library of crime.

★★★ **THE 9TH DIRECTIVE, *by Adam Hall*** (Simon & Schuster, $4.95)

Quiller's second memorandum concerns assassination in Bangkok, in a tense, driving and beautifully devious intrigue thriller.

★★★ **FROST, *by Andrew Hall*** (Putnam's, $4.95)

A very different A. Hall contributes a wry, half-mocking spy caper, with a splendid adolescent villainess.

★★★ **KINDS OF LOVE, KINDS OF DEATH, *by Tucker Coe*** (Random, $3.95)

Meaty blend of tough-minded narrative and firm formal construction —with the added puzzle (unsolved by me) of the author's identity.

★★★ **ALWAYS KILL A STRANGER, *by Robert L. Fish*** (Putnam's, $3.95)

New Red Mask Mystery line starts off auspiciously with a characteristically vivid José Da Silva adventure by an EQMM regular.

★★★ **WHAT SHOULD YOU KNOW OF DYING?, *by Tobias Wells*** (Crime Club, $3.95)

Knute Severson, Boston P.D., in a sensitive investigation of the disturbing icebox murder of a fosterchild.

★★★ **THE ACE OF SPIES, *by Don Von Elsner*** (Award A-188 F, 50¢)

Jake Winkman returns; attractive mixture of espionage with the strange world of championship bridge, complete with problems.

The annual anthology by Mystery Writers of America came out so late in 1966 that this is my first chance to inform you that it is SLEUTHS AND CONSEQUENCES, edited by Thomas B. Dewey (Simon & Schuster, $4.95), that it's unusually generous (120,000 words; 20 stories, 6 from EQMM), and that most of its offerings are both good and unhackneyed.

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a detective *NOVELET* by
CORNELL WOOLRICH

An interesting essay could be written on the thematic relationship between Cornell Woolrich and Walt Whitman. Far-fetched, you say? Perhaps . . . But look at it this way: Whitman celebrated the commonplace; Woolrich took the commonplace and distorted it, sometimes perverted it. But the thematic roots for both were undeniably in aspects and phases of everyday living . . .

Cornell Woolrich's "situation" in "The Talking Eyes" is classic for Woolrich. He asks you to begin with a woman of 60 who is completely and hopelessly paralyzed from head to foot. She can hear and she can see; but she can't move, she can't talk, she can't write, she can't gesture, she can't make any signs—except with her eyes. Now, imagine that helpless woman overhearing her daughter-in-law and an unknown lover plot the murder of her son—and you have, as we said, a classic Woolrich situation . . .

THE TALKING EYES

by *CORNELL WOOLRICH*

THE HOUSE WAS A PLEASANT TWO-story suburban affair, set in its own plot of ground, not close enough to its neighbors to impair privacy and seclusion, but not far enough away to be lonely or isolated. You could catch glimpses of them all around it through the trees and over the tops of the hedges that separated the lawns. You couldn't command a full view of any of them, and they couldn't command a full view of the house, either.

It had a back porch and a front one, and it had rambler roses trained around the porch posts both in front and in back.

It was midafternoon and Mrs. Janet Miller was sitting in her chair on the back porch. That was because the back of the house faced west and got the afternoon sun. Mornings she sat on the front porch, afternoons on the back.

Life had long ago been reduced to its barest essentials for her. The feel of the warm sun on her, the sight of the blue sky over her, the

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sound of Vern Miller's voice in her ears—those were the only things it held any more; those were the only things left to her. She didn't ask for more, so long as those weren't taken from her as everything else had been.

She sat there uncomplaining, content, almost—yes, almost happy, in her rubber-tired wheel chair, a blanket tucked snugly about her feet and lap. She could feel the sun on her, she could see the sky out through the porch posts, and as for the sound of his voice, that would come a little later—it was too early for that yet. She had that much more to look forward to, at least.

She was 60, with a pink-cheeked, unlined face, snow-white hair, trustful pottery-blue eyes. She was completely, hopelessly paralyzed from head to foot, and had been for the past ten years.

It seemed long ago—another lifetime ago now—that she had last walked on floors, moved up and down stairs, raised her hands to her hair to brush it, to her face to wash it, to her mouth to feed it, or expressed the thoughts that were still as clear, as undimmed as ever in her mind, by the sound of words issuing from her mouth. All that was gone now, gone and unlamented. She had trained herself, forced herself, steeled herself, not to lament it.

No one would ever know what it had cost her to accomplish that much; no one would ever know the private purgatory she had been through, the Via Dolorosa she had traversed. But she had emerged now, she had won her battle. She held tight to what remained to her. No monster-god ever worshipped by the most benighted savages could be cruel enough to take that pitiful remainder from her. The sun, the sky, and Vern's voice remained. She had achieved resignation, acceptance, content.

So she sat there motionless in the slanting sun, behind the twining rambler-rose tendrils. Something human, something living, that wanted its happiness too . . .

The doorbell rang on the other side of the house, and the footsteps of Vera, Vern's wife, started from the floor above to answer it. But quickly, with a rush, as though Vera had been waiting for this summons, as though she had seen who it was from one of the upper windows. It must be company then, and not just a tradesman or peddler.

Janet Miller could hear the front door open, then quickly close again, from where she sat. But no gush of feminine salutations followed. Instead, a man's voice said, cautiously muted, but not too muted to carry to the sharp ears whose sensitivity had increased rather than diminished since the loss of other faculties, "You alone?"

And Vera's voice answered, "Yes. Did anyone see you come in?"

That first husky, guarded voice

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hadn't been *the* voice, hadn't been Vern's. It couldn't be this early—not for another hour or more yet. Who could it be then? A man—that meant it was a friend of Vern's, of course. She knew all his friends and tried to place this one, but she couldn't. They never came at this hour. They were all busy downtown, as Vern was himself.

Well, she'd know in a minute. One thing about Vern's friends, the first thing they all did was come and say hello to her, ask her how she was, usually bring her something, some trifle or dainty.

Vera would bring him out to see her, or else wheel her in to where he was. She liked to meet company. That wasn't one of the three essentials—it was just a little pampering she allowed herself.

But instead of coming through the hall that bisected the house, out to where she was, they turned off into the living room, and she heard the door close after them, and from then on there wasn't another sound.

She couldn't understand that. Vera had never closed the door like that when they had company before. It must have been just absentmindedness on her part. She'd done it without thinking.

Or else maybe it was some little surprise they were preparing, for herself or for Vern, and they wanted to make sure of keeping it a secret. But Vern's birthday was long past, and her own didn't come until February—

She waited patiently but the door stayed closed. It seemed she wasn't to meet this caller, or be wheeled in to him. She sighed a little, disappointedly.

Then suddenly, without warning, they came through into the back of the house, into the kitchen. It had a window looking out on the back porch, a little to one side of where she was seated. She could even see into a very narrow strip of the room by looking out of the far corners of her eyes. She could move her eyes, of course.

Vera came in there first, the caller after her. She seemed to set something down on the kitchen table, then she started to undo it with a great crackling and rattling of paper. Some sort of parcel, evidently. So they were busied about a surprise, a gift, after all.

She heard Vera say, "Where'd you ever get this idea from?" with a sort of admiring, complimentary ring to her voice.

The man answered, "Reading in the papers about how they were passing them out over in London and Paris, when they were scared war was going to break out. Someone I know was over there at the time and brought some of them back with him. I 'borrowed' these from him."

"D'yuh think it'll work?" she asked.

He said, "Well, it's the best idea of the lot we've had so far, isn't it?"

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"That doesn't say much for some of the others," Vera answered.

The crackle of unwrapping paper had continued uninterruptedly until now. It stopped at last.

There was a moment's silence, then Vera said, "Aren't they funny-looking things?"

The man said, "They'll do the trick, though. Never mind how they look."

The paper crackled one last time, then Vera said, "What'd you bring two for?"

"One for the old lady," he answered.

Janet Miller experienced a pleasant little glow of anticipation. They had something for her; they were going to give her something, some little present or memento.

"What for?" she heard Vera say impatiently. "Why not both of them at once?"

"Use your head," the man growled. "That's the one thing we want to avoid. She's our immunity, don't you get it? Sort of like an alibi. As long as nothing happens to her, it's good for an accident. But if they both go, then it looks too much like we wanted the decks cleared. Don't let's load the dice against ourselves. One out of three people in a house, we can get away with. But two out of three, and it'll begin to smell fishy.

"Don't forget you're in the same room with him. She's up at the other end of the hall. How's it going to look if he goes and you, right next to him, don't. And then she goes too, all the way out in another room, with a couple of closed doors in between?"

"All right," Vera conceded grudgingly. "But if you had to push her around all day and wait on her like I do—"

The sunlight falling on Janet Miller seemed to have changed. It was cold, baleful now. She could hear her heart pounding against her ribs, and her breath was coming fast, through fear-distended nostrils.

The man went on, "You better let me show you how to put it on while I'm here, so you'll know how it goes when the time comes."

Vera started to say something, but her voice was blurred out as though she had stuck her head into a bag.

Suddenly she came too close to the window, moved inadvertently within that narrow segment of the room that the far corners of Janet Miller's eyes could encompass. Her whole head had vanished. If the paralytic had been capable of sound, she would have screamed. Vera had what looked like a horse's feed bag up over her entire face. A nozzle protruded from this and went down somewhere out of sight. There were two round gogglelike disks for eyes.

A gas mask!

She shifted farther back into the room, out of sight again. Her voice sounded clearly once more. She

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must have taken it off. "Whew! Stuffy. Are you sure it'll work? I'm not in this to take any chances myself, you know."

"They're made to stand much worse stuff than you're going to get tonight."

"Where'll I keep them? I don't want him to find them before I'm ready for them. I'm afraid if I take them up to the room with me he'll —"

Janet Miller heard the clang of the oven door being opened, pushed closed again.

"Here's a place he'll never look into in a million years. Supper's all cooked. I can just warm it on top of the stove. He never bothers with the kitchen much. I'll come down and get them the last thing, after he's asleep. Take the paper out with you."

More crackle of paper, this time being smoothed and folded small, to fit into someone's pocket.

The man's voice said, "That's that. Now have you got everything straight? Put the spare on the old lady. Don't cross me up on that. We're just laying ourselves wide open if you let her go with him. Don't put your own on ahead of time—he's liable to wake up and see you wearing it. Hold out as long as you can before you get into it—it won't hurt you to get a little of the stuff in you. Remember, you've got an inhalator squad to buck afterwards.

"Get rid of all the papers and rags stuffed under the windows before they get here. And when you phone the alarm, don't speak over the phone. Your voice is liable to sound too strong. Just knock the receiver off and leave it that way—that'll bring 'em. It'll take a little longer, but what've you got to lose? You're in a fade-out on the floor near the door, just couldn't make it.

"But the most important thing of all is the masks. If they're found around here afterwards, we're cooked. Take hers and yours off before they get here—when you're sure he's finished—and lock 'em both in the rumble seat of the car, out in the garage. You won't be using it after he's gone. You don't even know how to drive. In a day or two you phone the Ajax Garage —that's my place—to come and get it, take it off your hands, sell it for you. I'll take them out at my end, return them as soon as I can, and no one'll ever be the wiser."

"How long'll I give him? I've heard of them pulling people through after working over 'em an hour, sometimes more. We want to make sure that don't happen."

"Just see that he soaks up enough, and you can bet all the oxygen in the world won't pull him through. Watch his face. When that gets good and blue, all mottled, you got nothing more to worry about. You better lie low for about a month afterwards. Give them a chance to settle up the estate and

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all that. I'll give you a ring in—say, thirty days from tonight. Are you sure everything's shaped up right?"

"Yeah. He's insured up to his ears. All his stock's been bought in my name. The business has been doing pretty good, and there are no other relatives to horn in. We'll be set for life, Jimmy darling. That's why I held out against doing it any other way—there wouldn't've been any sense to it."

"Where's the old lady?" he asked unexpectedly.

"On the back porch where she always is."

"Hey, she can hear us, can't she? Let's get out of here!"

She laughed callously. "Suppose she does hear us? What can she do? Who can she tell? She can't talk, she can't write, she can't even make signs."

They didn't even bother looking out at her to see whether she was dozing or awake.

"All right," was the last thing he said. "Don't get frightened now. Just keep your head and everything'll pan out. See you in a month."

They exchanged a kiss—a blood-red kiss of death.

Then they went out of the kitchen, back into the living room. They opened the side door of that, and came out into the hall. The front door opened and closed again and Janet Miller was left alone in the house—with her knowledge and the prospective murderess of her son.

Vernon Miller was a genial, easy-going, good-hearted, unsuspicious sort of man, the kind that so often draws a woman like Vera to be his life partner. He was no easy mark, no sap. He was wary enough in business, and in the outside world of men and affairs he could even be implacable, hard-boiled, if the occasion warranted. The trouble was, he let his defenses down in the wrong place—laid himself wide open at home.

Janet Miller heard his key in the door. He said "Hello, there!" to the house in general. Vera came down the stairs, and Janet Miller heard them exchange a kiss. A Judas kiss.

Then he came out to the back porch to see her, and the third component of her trinity, the sound of his voice, was vouchsafed her.

"Did you enjoy the sun?"

Her eyes.

"Want me to take you in now?"

Her terrible eyes.

"Look what I brought you."

Her eyes, her terrible imploring eyes.

"Did you miss me? Glad I'm back? Is that why you're looking at me like that?" He squatted down to the level of the chair and cupped his hand to his knees. "What're you trying to tell me, darling?"

Her eyes, her haunted eyes.

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"Shall I try for you? Blink them once for no, twice for yes."

This was an old established code between them, their only link.

"Are you hungry?"

No.

"Are you chilly?"

No.

"Are you—"

Vera called out from the kitchen, interrupting them. "Don't stay out there all night, Vern. I'm all ready for you."

Her eyes, her despairing eyes.

Vern straightened up, shifted around behind the wheel chair, out of sight, and rolled her into the living room ahead of him. He left her there for a minute and went upstairs.

Even her only weapon, the use of her eyes, was blunted, for they almost always followed him around a room, in and out of doors, even on other nights when they had no terrible message to deliver. So how could he be expected to tell the difference tonight?

Vera finished setting the table. "All right, Vern," she called up.

He came down again, hands freshly washed, guided her chair into the dining room, pushed it close up beside Vera at the table, then sat down opposite them. Vera was the one who always fed her.

He opened his napkin, looked down, and began to spoon soup.

Vera broke the brief preliminary silence. "She won't open her mouth."

She was trying to force a spoonful through Janet Miller's clenched teeth. Janet Miller had retained just enough muscular control of her jaws to be able to close or slightly relax her mouth, sufficiently to take food. It was tightly shut now.

He looked over at her and she blinked at him. Singly, three times. *No—no—no.*

"Don't you feel well? Don't you want any?"

"She's just being stubborn," Vera said. "She was perfectly all right all day."

Yes, I was, thought Janet Miller—until you let death into my son's house.

Vera kept trying to force the spoon through. Janet Miller resisted it. It tilted and the soup splashed off. "Now look at that!" Vera exclaimed short-temperedly.

"Do you want me to feed you?" he asked.

She couldn't signal those three double blinks fast enough. *Yes—yes—yes.*

He got up and moved the wheel chair around beside his own.

Vera began to apply herself to her own meal with a muttered, "You can have the job, see if I care."

So far so good. She was over beside him now, in closer contact. So near and yet so far. Her pitiful, desperate plan was first to rivet his attention to the fact that something was wrong, that something was troubling her, and hold it there.

That was the easiest part of it.

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Once that was accomplished, she must find some way of centering his interest on that oven in which the two gas masks lay concealed. Get him to go to it, open it himself if possible. Failing that, get him to force Vera to go to it, open it.

In such event Vera would undoubtedly attempt to smuggle them out of their hiding place, find another for them without letting him see her do it. But they were large, bulky, not easily concealed. The chances of his discovering them would be that much greater.

Even if he did discover them, that by no means guaranteed that he would understand their implication, realize they meant his own intended death. Vera would probably find some explanation to fob off on him. But she might lose her nerve; if nothing else, it might result in a postponement. Lacking speech with which to warn him, that was the most Janet Miller could hope for.

So she took the long devious, roundabout path that was the only one open to her, to try to focus his attention on the gas oven—by refusing to touch, one by one, all the dishes that had been prepared on the open burners on top of the stove.

"She's not touching a thing," he said finally. He put his hand solicitously to her forehead, to feel if she had a temperature. It was moist with anguish.

"Don't humor her so much," Vera snapped. "There's nothing the matter with this food."

"What is it, dear, aren't you hungry?" She'd been waiting for that! She gave him the *yes* signal time after time.

"She *is* hungry!" he said in surprise.

"Then why doesn't she eat what's put before her?" Vera said furiously.

"Maybe she wants something special."

Step two! Oh, if it only kept up like this. If she was only given the chance to save him . . .

"I like that," sniffed Vera disdainfully. She was still not on guard against her. As soon as that happened, Janet Miller knew, it would double her difficulties.

He leaned toward her tenderly. "Do you want something special, dear? Something that's not on the table?"

Yes—yes—yes—came her agonized messages.

"See, I knew it!" he said triumphantly.

"Well, she's not going to get it," Vera snapped.

He gave her a rebuking look. All he said, mildly but firmly, was, "Yes, she is." But his meaning was plain—"Would you deprive anyone so unfortunate of a little thing like that, if you knew it would make her a little happier?"

Vera saw she'd gone too far. She tried to cover up her blunder.

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"How you going to tell what it is, anyway?" she asked sulkily.

"I'll make it my business to," he said, a little coldly.

Janet Miller's thoughts were racing ahead. Many things could be prepared in that oven, but most of them—roasts, pies, and so forth—were out of the question; they needed long cooking ahead.

It must be something that could only be made in there, and yet would not take much time. It held a wire rack, a grill. That was it! Bacon. That could be made almost instantly, and there was always some in the house.

He was patiently running through a list of delicacies, trying to arrive at the right one by a process of elimination.

"Do you want croquettes?"

No.

"Succotash?"

No.

"Meantime your own meal is getting cold," Vera observed sarcastically. Her nerves were a little on edge, with what she knew lay ahead. She was not ordinarily so heartless about Janet; or rather, she was, but she took good pains to keep it concealed from him.

He began to run out of food names; his suggestions came slower, were about ready to falter to a stop. Fear stabbed at her. She widened her eyes at him imploringly to go on.

Vera came to her aid without meaning to. "It's no use, Vern," she said disgustedly. "Are you going to keep this up all night?"

Her latent opposition only served to stiffen his determination; it spurred him on to further attempts. "I'm not going to let her go away from this table hungry!" he said stubbornly, and started in again, this time with breakfast dishes, for he had run out of supper ones.

"Cereal?"

No.

"Ham and eggs?"

No.

Oh, how close he was getting.

"Bacon?"

Yes—yes—yes—went her eyes. Her heart sang a paean of gratitude.

He smacked his palm down on the table in vindication.

"I knew I'd get it finally."

Her eyes left him and shifted appraisingly to Vera. All the color had drained from her face; it was white as the tablecloth before her.

The two women, the mother and the wife, the would-be savior and the would-be killer, exchanged a long measured look.

"So you heard us!" was in Vera's look.

"So you know."

And then with cruel, easily read derision, "Well, try to tell him. Try to save him."

He said plaintively, "You heard what she wants, Vera. What're you sitting there for? Go ahead and broil her a few strips."

Vera's face was that of a trapped thing. She swallowed, though she

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hadn't been chewing just then. "I should say not! I got one meal ready. I'm not going to get up in the middle of it and start another! It'll get the stove all greasy and—and—"

He threw his napkin down. "I'll do it myself then. That's one of the few things I do know how to cook—bacon!"

But before he could move she had shot up from her chair, streaked over toward the doorless opening that led to the kitchen, as though something were burning.

"Can't you take a joke?" she said thickly. "What kind of a wife d'you take me for? I wouldn't let you, after you've been working hard all day. Won't take a minute . . ."

He was so defenseless, so unguarded—because he thought he'd left all antagonists outside the front door. He fell for it, grinning amiably after her.

Oh, if he'd only keep looking, only keep watching her from where he was! He could see the oven door from where he was sitting. He could see what she'd have to take out of it in another minute.

But there was no suspicion in his heart, no thought of treachery. He turned back toward his mother again, smiled into her face reassuringly, patted one of her nerveless hands.

For once her eyes had no time for him. They kept staring past him into the lighted kitchen. If only he'd turn and follow their direction with his own!

She saw Vera glance craftily out at them first, measuring her chances of remaining undetected in what she was about to do. Then she crouched down and let out the oven flap. Then she looked again, to make sure the position of his head hadn't shifted in the meantime.

Then she quickly crushed the two bulky olive-drab masks to her, turned furtively away with them so that her back was to the dining room, sidled across the room that way, sidewise, and thrust them up into a seldom-used cupboard where preserves were kept.

So it hadn't been just an evil dream. There was murder in the house.

Janet Miller's eyes hadn't been idle while the brief transfer was occurring. They had shifted frantically from Vera to him, from him to Vera, trying to draw his own after them, to look in there.

She failed. He misunderstood, thought she was simply impatient for the bacon. "You'll have it in a minute now," he soothed, but he kept on eating his own meal without looking into the kitchen.

Vera came in with the bacon finally, and the smile she gave Janet Miller was not a sweet, solicitous one as he thought; it was a she-devil's smile of mockery and refined cruelty. She knew Janet had seen what she'd done in there just now, and she was taunting her

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with her inability to communicate it to him.

"Here we are," she purred. "Nice and crispy, done to a turn!"

"Thanks, Vera," The doomed man smiled up at her gratefully.

The meal finished, he went to the living room to read his paper, wheeling her ahead of him. Vera, with a grim, gloating look at her, went back into the kitchen to wash the dishes.

Janet Miller's eyes were on his face the whole time they sat in there alone, but he wouldn't look up at her; he remained buried in the stock market reports and football results. Oh, to have a voice—even the hoarsest whispered croak—what an opportunity, the two of them in there alone like that! But then if she could speak, the opportunity wouldn't have been given to her. She probably wouldn't have been allowed to overhear in the first place.

Even so, Vera was taking no chances on any circuitous system of communication by trial and error, such as he had used at the table to find out what she wanted. Twice she came as far as the living-room door, stood there and looked in at them for a moment, dishcloth in her hand, on some excuse or other.

His doomed head remained lowered to his paper, oblivious of the frenzied eyes that bored into him, beat at him like electric pulses to claim his attention.

Vera directed an evil smile at the helpless woman at his side, then returned to the kitchen, well content.

Time was so precious, and it was going so fast. Once Vera came in here with them, she'd never leave them again for the rest of the evening.

He felt her imploring eyes on him once, reached out and absently stroked her veined hand without looking up; but that was the closest she got to piercing his unawareness. A football score, a bond quotation, a comic strip—these things were dooming him to death.

Vera came in at last, helped herself to a cigarette from his coat pocket, then turned on the radio. He looked up at her and said, "Oh, by the way, did you phone the gas company to send a man around to look at that hot-water heater in the bathroom? I'd like to take a bath tonight."

A knife of dread went through Janet Miller's heart. So that was how it was going to be done! That defective hot-water heater in the upstairs bathroom. She closed her eyes in consternation, opened them again. She hadn't known until now what to expect—only that it would be gas in some form or other.

Vera snapped her fingers in pretended dismay. "I meant to, and it slipped my mind completely!" she said contritely.

It hadn't. Janet Miller knew. She'd purposely refrained from reporting it. That was part of their

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plan—to make it look more natural afterward. An unavoidable accident.

"We've used it this long, once more can't hurt," she said reassuringly.

"I know, but it's dangerous the way that thing leaks when you turn it on. We're all liable to be overcome one of these nights. If a man wants anything done around here he's got to attend to it himself," he grumbled.

"I'll notify them the first thing in the morning," she promised submissively.

But there wouldn't be any morning for him.

A moment later she artfully took his mind off the subject by calling his attention to something on the radio. "Did you hear that just then? That was a good one! I think those two are awfully funny."

A joke on the radio—what could be more harmless than that? Yet it was helping to kill a man.

A station announcement came through—"Ten P.M., Eastern Standard Time—"

"Things are picking up. If they keep on like this, I think we'll be able to take that cruise next summer."

No, you won't, Janet Miller screamed at him in terrible silence; you're going to be killed tonight! Oh, why can't I make you hear me?

The station announcement came through again. It seemed to her like only a minute since they'd heard the last one. "Ten thirty P.M., Eastern Standard Time—"

He yawned comfortably. "Before you know it the holidays'll be here. What do you want for Christmas?"

"Anything you want to give me," she simpered demurely.

He turned and looked at Janet, then scrutinized her more closely. "What's the matter, dear? Why, there are beads of sweat on your forehead." He came over, took his handkerchief and gently touched them off one by one.

But Vera quickly jumped into the breach. She was on her guard now. Janet had her to combat as well as her own incapacity. The odds were insuperable.

"The room is too close, that's all it is. I feel it myself . . ." Vera pretended to mop her own brow.

He reached down and touched Janet's hands.

"But her hands are so cold! That can't be it—"

"Oh, well—" Vera dropped her eyes tactfully. "Her circulation, you know," she murmured under her breath, as if trying not to hurt the paralytic's feelings.

He nodded, satisfied.

Janet's eyes clung to him desperately. Hear me! Why can't you hear me? Why can't you understand what I'm trying so hard to tell you?

He got up and stretched. "I think I'll go up and light that thing, get ready for my bath and then go to bed. I've had a tough day."

"I think we may as well all go

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up," Vera said accommodatingly. "There's nothing but swing on all the stations from now on and it gets monotonous." The dial light of the radio snapped out. On such a casual, everyday, domestic note began the preparations for murder.

He picked his mother carefully up in his arms and started for the stairs. Her chair was always left downstairs; it was too bulky to be taken up at nights.

She thought distractedly, while the uncarpeted oak steps ticked off beneath him one by one: Who'll carry me down in the morning? Oh, my son, my son, where will you be then?

On the stairs their two faces were closer together than at other times. Her frozen lips strained toward him, striving to implant a kiss. He said jocularly, "What are you breathing so hard for? I'm doing all the work."

He carried her into her own room, set her down on the bed, and promised, "I'll be in to say good night in a minute," and went out to start heating the water for his bath.

It was Vera who always prepared her for bed. She never needed to be completely undressed, for she no longer wore street clothing, only a warm woolen robe and felt slippers. It was simply a matter of taking these off and arranging the bed coverings about her.

Vera came in and attended to the task as inscrutably, as matter-of-factly, as though there were no knowledge shared between them of what was to happen tonight. This woman bending over her was worse than a murderess: she was a monster, not human at all.

Janet's eyes were beseeching her, trying to say to her, "Don't do this, don't take him from me." But it was useless, like appealing to granite. There were two impulses in Vera too strong to be deflected, to be overcome—passion for another man, and greed. Pity didn't have a chance.

He was in the bathroom now. There was the soft thud of ignited gas. He called in, just as Vera finished arranging Janet in bed, "Hey, Vera! Do you think it's all right to light this thing? There must be a whale of a leak in it. The flame is more white than blue, with the air in it!"

There was a faint but distinct hum coming from the hot-water heater. That, however, was not a sign of its being defective, merely a normal accompaniment to its being used.

"Of course it's all right," Vera called back unhesitatingly. "Don't be such a sissy! You'd better not put off taking that bath tonight. You're always too rushed in the morning, and then raise hob with me!"

A thread of acrid warning drifted into Janet's bedroom, dissolved unnoticeably after a single stab at

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her nostrils. Vera had gone into their bedroom to begin undressing herself. He came in to Janet, in bathrobe and slippers, and he looked so young, so vigorous—to die this soon!

He said, "I'll say good night to you now, hon. You must be tired and want to go to sleep."

Then as he bent toward her to kiss her forehead, he saw something and stopped short. He changed his mind and sat down on the edge of the bed instead, looking at her steadily.

"Vera," he called over his shoulder, "come in here a minute."

She came, the murderess, in pink satin and foamy lace, like an angel of destruction, stroking her loosened hair with a silver-backed brush.

"What is it now?" She said it a little jumpily.

"Something's troubling her, Vera. We've got to find out what it is. Look, there are tears in her eyes."

Vera's face was a little tense with fear. She forced it into an expression of sympathetic concern, but she had an explanation ready to throw at him, to forestall further inquiry. "Well, after all, Vern," she said in an undertone close to his ear, as though not wanting Janet to overhear her, "it's only natural she should feel that way every once in a while. She has every reason to. Don't forget, we've gotten used to —what happened to her, but it must come back to her every so often." She gave his shoulder a soothing little pat. "That's all it is," she whispered.

He was partly convinced, but not entirely. "But she doesn't take it so hard other nights. Why should she tonight? Ever since I came home tonight she's been watching me so. I've had the strangest feeling at times that she's trying to tell me something . . ."

There was no mistaking the pallor on Vera's face now, but it could so easily have been ascribed to concern about the invalid's welfare, to a wifely sharing of her husband's anxiety.

"I think I'll sit with her a while," he said.

Yes, stay in here with me, pleaded the woman on the bed; stay in here, stay awake—and nothing can happen to you.

Vera put her arms considerately around his shoulders and gently raised him to his feet. "No, you go in and take your bath. The water must be hot now. I'll sit with her. She'll be all right in the morning, you'll see."

But he won't, my son won't.

Vera threw her a grimace meant to express kindly understanding, as he turned and padded out of the room. "She's just a little downhearted, that's all."

Vera moved over to the window and stood looking out with her back to the room. She couldn't bear to face those accusing eyes on the bed. There was a muffled sound

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of splashing coming through the bathroom door, and then after a while he came out.

"Sure you turned that thing off now?" Vera called in to him warningly. A warning not meant to save, and that couldn't save.

"Yeah," he said through the folds of a towel, "but you can notice the gas odor distinctly. We've got to get that thing fixed the first thing tomorrow. I'm not going to shut myself up in there with it any more. How's Mom?"

"Shh! I've got her to sleep already. No, don't go in, you'll only wake her." She reached up and treacherously snapped the light out.

No! Let me say goodbye to him at least! If I can't save him, at least let me see him once more before you—

The door ebbed silently, remorselessly closed, cutting her off. Help! Help! ran the demented whirlpool of her thoughts.

There was the murmured sound of their two voices coming thinly through the partition wall for a few moments. Then a window sash going up. Then the muted snap of the light switch on their side. It seemed she could hear everything through the paper-thin wall. Not even that was to be spared her.

Sweat poured down her face, though a cool fresh night wind was blowing in through her own open window . . .

Silence. Silence that crouched waiting, like an animal ready to pounce. Silence, that pounded, throbbed like a drum. Silence that went on and on, and almost gave birth to hope, it was so protracted.

Then a very slight sound from in there, barely distinguishable at all—the slither of a window sash coming down to the bottom, sealing the room up.

Her own door opened softly, and a ghostly white-gowned form stole silently past along the wall, lowered the window in here, stuffed rags around its frame. She must have had the water heater turned on for quite some time already—without being lit this time, of course. The sharp, pungent odor of gas drifted in after her, thickened momentarily. Then Vera slipped out again, on her errand of death.

One of the lower steps of the staircase, far below, creaked slightly at her passage. Even the slight grinding of the oven door, as it came open, reached Janet Miller's straining ears in the stillness. She must have put them back in there again, when she had been washing the dishes.

The odor thickened. Janet Miller began to hear a humming in her ears—at first far away, then drawing nearer, nearer, like a train rushing onward through a long echoing tunnel. He coughed, moaned a little in his sleep, on the other side of the wall—sleep that was turning into death. He must be getting the effects worse in there. He was near-

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er the bath, nearer the source of annihilation.

The form glided into Janet's room again. It looked faintly bluish now, not white any more. Janet Miller wanted to be sick to her stomach. There was a roaring in her ears. A train was rushing through her skull—in one side, out the other now—and the room was lurching around her.

She was pulled up from the pillow she rested on and a voice seemed to say from miles away, "I guess you've had enough to fool them," and something came down over her head. Suddenly she could breathe pure sweet air again. The roaring held steady for a while, then began to recede, as if the train were going in reverse now.

It died away at last. The blue dimness went out too.

My son! My son!

Through two round goggles she saw the light of dawn come filtering strangely into the room about her. A wavering figure appeared before them presently, one arm out to support herself against the wall as she advanced. Vera, wavering not because Janet Miller's vision was defective any longer, but because the quantity of gas accumulated in the airtight rooms was beginning to affect her, even in the short time since she'd taken off her own mask. She held a wet handkerchief pressed to her mouth in its place, and was evidently striving to hold her breath.

She had sense enough to go over to the window first, remove the rags, and open it a little from the bottom before she came back to the bed, reared Janet up to a sitting position, and fumblingly pulled the mask off her.

The humming started up again in Janet's ears, as if the train was coming back toward her.

Vera was gagging into the handkerchief. "Hold your breath all you can, until I get back here," she sobbed. "I'm telling you this for your own sake."

She trailed the mask after her by its nozzle, went tottering in a zigzag course out of the room.

Janet Miller could hear her floundering, rather than walking, down the stairs. A door far at the back of the house opened, stayed that way.

The humming kept on increasing for a little while, but then drifts of uncontaminated air from the open window began knifing their way in, neutralizing it. Gas must still be pouring out of the heater in the bath down the hall, however.

Hold your breath as much as you can, she had said just now. That was to live, though. He's gone, Janet Miller thought. He must be by now, or she wouldn't have come in here to take the mask off me. Maybe I can go with him—that's the best thing for me to do now.

She began to take great deep

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breaths, greedily draw in all the poisoned air she could, hold it in her lungs. Like going under purposely in a dentist chair, when they gave you a breath count.

The humming advanced on her again, became a deep-throated roar. The room became a dark-blue pinwheel, spinning madly, rapidly darkening around its edges as it spun.

We'll fool them, Vern, we'll go together, she thought hazily. The darkness had reached the center of the pinwheel now; only a pinpoint of blue remained at its exact core. Glass tinkled somewhere far off, but that had nothing to do with her.

The pinpoint of blue went out and there was nothing . . .

She was very thirsty and she kept drinking air. Such delicious air. It poured down her and she couldn't get enough of it. She couldn't see anything. She was inside a big tent —something like that anyway—but she could hear a murmur of voices.

Then there was a blinding flash of light and the delicious flow of air stopped for a minute.

Then the kindly darkness returned, the flow of air resumed.

"She's coming up. She'll be all right."

"Wonderful, isn't it? You'd think just a whiff of it, anyone in her condition—"

The flash of light repeated itself. Then again, and again, faster and faster all the time, like a flickering movie film, and suddenly it stayed on permanently. There was no more darkness, and her eyes were open.

She was violently sick, and although she thought that was a bad thing, the faces all around her looked on encouragingly and nodded, as though it were a very good thing.

"She's all right now. Nothing more to worry about."

"How're the other two?" someone called inside to another room.

"The wife's okay," the voice of somebody unseen answered. "The husband's gone."

They picked her up—she must have been on a stretcher—and started to carry her out. Just before they left the room with her, a desolate screaming started up somewhere within the house.

"No, no, don't stop! Bring him back! You must! Oh, why couldn't it have been me instead? Why did it have to be him?"

They carried Janet Miller out and put her into the back of an automobile, and she didn't hear any more of the screaming.

A pallid, mournful figure came into the room with the nurse. It was hard to recognize Vera in mourning clothes. This was two days later.

"You're going home now, dear," the nurse told Janet Miller cheerfully. "Here's your daughter-in-law

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come to take you back with her."

Janet Miller blinked her eyes. *No—no—no.* But it wasn't any use. They didn't know the old code that she and Vern had had.

"Can you manage it?" the nurse asked Vera.

"I have a friend waiting downstairs with a car. If you'll just have somebody wheel the chair down for me, we can take her right in it with us."

She was taken down in an elevator, still blinking futilely, and rolled out to the hospital driveway by the orderly. A man got out of a sedan waiting there. So now she saw her son's co-murderer for the first time.

He was taller than Vern had been and better-looking, much better-looking, but his face was weaker; it didn't have as much character. It was the kind of face that the Veras of this world go to hell for.

He and the orderly lifted her out of the chair and got her onto the front seat of the car. Then the chair was fastened to the outside, in back. It was too bulky to fit inside the car.

Vera got in next to her—she was between the two of them now—and they drove away from the hospital. She hadn't been kept there all this time because of the gas, of course, but simply so she could be cared for properly during the first acute stages of Vera's "grief."

"That cost plenty!" Vera said explosively as the hospital receded behind them.

"It looked good though, didn't it?" he argued. "Anyway, what the hell. We've got plenty of it now, haven't we?"

"All right, but why waste it on her? What're we going to do—have her hanging around our necks like a millstone from now on?"

The shoulders of both of them were pressed against hers, one on each side; yet they spoke back and forth as though she were five miles away, without pity for her helplessness.

"She's our immunity. How many times do I have to tell you that? So long as she stays with us, under the same roof, looked after by us, there won't be a whisper raised. We gotta have her around—for a while anyway."

Vera flipped back her widow's veil and put a cigarette in her mouth. "I'll have time for just one before we get to our own neighborhood. Gee, I'll be glad when this sob act is over!"

She threw the cigarette out of he car and lowered the veil again as they turned down the street that led to the house that had belonged to Janet Miller's son. A residue of smoke came through the mesh of the veil and made her look like the monster she was.

Vera went in first, head bowed in case the neighbors were looking. He carried Janet in his arms, came back for the chair, and took that in afterward.

"Now come on, clear out," Vera

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said to him as soon as Janet had been installed in it. "You can't begin to hang around here yet—they may be watching."

"Let me get a pick-up, at least," he growled. "What's the idea of the bum's rush?"

He downed two fingers of Vern's brandy with a single streamlined motion, from decanter to tumbler to mouth.

"I thought you were the one wanted to be careful. We gotta take it easy."

She came back into the room again after she'd sped him on his way and slung off her widow's hat and veil. She found Janet's eyes fastened on her remorselessly, like two bright stones.

She helped herself to a drink as he had—a little jerkily, not quite so streamlined. "Now I'm going to tell you one thing," she flared out at her unexpectedly. "If you want to stay out of trouble, keep those eyes of yours off me. Quit staring at me all the time! I know what you're thinking. You may as well forget it, because it won't do you a bit of good!"

His visits increased in number and lengthened in duration until, about three weeks after they'd brought her back from the hospital, they were married. They didn't announce it, of course, but Janet Miller heard them talking about it when they came home one day, and he didn't leave the house again from then on. He just moved in with them, so she knew what it meant. She found out what his name was then, too, for the first time. Haggard, Jimmy Haggard. Co-murderer of Vernon Miller.

The community at large would probably think it was one of those "whirlwind" courtships. Young widow alone in world turns to only person who has shown her sympathy in her distress—very natural. Its haste might shock them, but then after all, another three or four weeks would elapse before it could be definitely confirmed, and by then it would seem that much less abrupt.

Janet Miller lived in a state of suspended animation for a while, a trancelike condition between being dead and alive. She undoubtedly drew breath and imbibed nourishment, so technically she was alive, but little more than that could be said for her.

Not only his voice was gone now, but the other two primaries had gone with it—the sun and the blue sky. None of the three would ever return again. And so she would surely have died within a month or two at the most, for sheer lack of will to live, when slowly but surely a spark ignited; a new vital force began to glow sullenly, taking the place of the three that had vanished. Revenge.

From a spark it became a flame, from a flame an all-consuming conflagration. She was more alive now

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than she had ever been since her disabling catastrophe had overtaken her. Fiercely it burned, by day, by night. It needed no replenishment, no renewal.

Time meant nothing to it. Hours meant nothing, days meant nothing, years meant nothing. She would wait. She would live to be a hundred, if need be, but she would wreak her retribution on this pair before she went. Surely, inescapably. Some day, somehow.

They played into her hands. They found her a burden, a nuisance. They began to bicker and quarrel about her. Neither one wanted to be annoyed moving her chair or feeding her.

He had more humanity than the woman. No, that was not quite it—not real humanity, merely consideration. It was just that he was less reckless than Vera, more craven.

"But we can't just let her starve, and she can't feed herself! She'll die on our hands for lack of attention, and then they're liable to find out we neglected her, and one thing'll lead to another, and first thing you know they'll reopen the other thing, start putting two and two together, start asking questions."

"Well then, hire somebody to look after her. I'm not staying home all the time to spoon mush into her mouth and tuck her into bed! Get a companion for her. We've got dough enough for that now. Or else get rid of her altogether—farm her out to some nursing home."

"No, not yet. We gotta keep her with us a few months at least, until we've cooled off," he insisted. "And yet I don't like the idea of letting a stranger in here with us. It's kind of risky. Especially somebody from the neighborhood that used to know Miller. We've got to be careful. One of us is liable to shoot our mouths off when we've got a lot of booze in us."

While he was trying to make up his mind whether or not to take a chance—to advertise or go to an agency—the matter was decided for him by one of those fortuitous coincidences that sometimes happen. A well-spoken young fellow, apparently down on his luck, was passing by one morning, and seeing Haggard on the front porch, approached timorously and asked if there was any work he could do, such as mowing the lawn or washing the windows. He explained that he was hitchhiking his way across country, and had just reached town half an hour before. As a matter of fact, he was packing a small bundle with him, apparently the sum total of his worldly goods.

Haggard looked him over speculatively. Then he glanced at the old lady. That seemed to give him an idea. "Come in a minute," he said.

Janet Miller could hear them talking in the living room. Then he called Vera down and consulted with her. She seemed to approve—probably only too glad to have

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someone take the old lady off their hands.

Vera brought him outside with her right after that, minus his bundle now.

"Here she is," she said curtly. "Now you understand what's required, don't you? We'll be out a good deal. You've got to spoon-feed her, and don't take any nonsense from her. She's got a cute little habit of going on hunger strikes. Pinch her nose until she has to open her mouth for air, if you have any trouble with her.

"You sleep out, but get here about nine so you can take her down on the porch. You don't need to worry about dressing her—just wrap her in a blanket if I'm not up. Take her back to her room at night, after she's been fed. That's all there is to it. I want someone in the house with her while we're out, just to see that nothing happens."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"All right—what's your name again?"

"Casement."

"All right, Casement. Mr. Haggard's already told you what you're to get. That about covers everything. You can consider yourself hired. Bring out a chair for yourself, if you want one."

He sat down to one side of the rubber-tired wheel chair, where he could watch her, hands on his knees, his legs apart.

They looked at each other, the old woman and the young man.

He smiled a little at her, tentatively. She could read sympathy behind it. She sensed, somehow, that this was his first job of this kind, that he'd never come into contact with anything like this before.

After about half an hour he got up and said, "I think I'll get a glass of water. You want one too?" as though she could have answered. Then remembering that she couldn't, he stood there at a loss, looking at her, and finally mumbled, half to himself, "How'm I going to tell when you . . ." He rubbed his neck bafflingly.

He turned and went inside anyway, came out again in a minute, bringing a glass for her. He carried it over to her and stood with it, looking down at her uncertainly.

She blinked her eyes twice to show him she was thirsty. To show him—if possible—a little more than that. He held it to her lips and slowly let its contents trickle into her mouth until it was empty.

"Want any more?" he asked.

She blinked once this time.

He put the glass on the floor and stood looking at her, thoughtfully stroking his chin. "Sometimes you blink twice in a hurry, sometimes you just blink once. What is that for, yes and no? Well now, let's find out just to make sure."

He picked up a newspaper, found the word *yes* in it, held his finger under it, and showed it to her. She blinked twice.

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Then he found a *no,* showed that to her. She blinked once.

"Well, now we're that much ahead, aren't we?" he said cheerfully.

Her eyes seemed to be smiling—they were very expressive eyes. The code—she had her old code back again, as easy as that! He was a very smart young man.

The afternoon waned. He pushed her chair in to the supper table, sat and spooned food to her mouth, a little awkwardly at first, but soon got the hang of it; he learned he must not load the spoon too much, as her jaws could only open to a limited extent.

Vera gave him a look. "You seem to have better luck with her than we did. She'll swallow for you, at least."

"Sure," he said comfortably without taking his eyes from what he was doing, "Mrs. Miller and I are going to be great friends."

Janet Miller couldn't account for it, but he had spoken the truth. She could feel a sense of confidence, almost of alliance with him, without knowing why.

He carried her up to her room later and she didn't see him any more that night. But she lay there in the dark, content. The flame still burned high, unquenchable. Perhaps . . .

In the morning he came up to get her, carried her downstairs, gave her orange juice to drink, and sat with her on the front porch. For a while he just sat, basking as she was. Then presently he turned his head and glanced behind him at the front windows of the house, as if to ascertain whether anyone was in those rooms or not. But the way he did it was so casual she didn't read any meaning into it. Perhaps he was just thinking to himself that the Haggards were late risers.

He said in a rather low voice, almost an undertone, "Do you like Mr. Haggard?"

Her eyes snapped just once—*no*—like a blue electric spark.

He waited a while, then he said, "Do you like Mrs. Haggard?"

The negative blink this time was almost ferocious.

"I wonder why," he said slowly, but it didn't sound like a question.

That sense of alliance, of confederacy, came over her again, stronger than ever. Her eyes were fastened on him hopefully.

"It's too bad we can't talk," he sighed, and relapsed into silence.

Vera came downstairs, and then Haggard followed her. They began to bicker and their voices were clearly audible out on the porch.

"I gave you fifty only last night!" she snarled. "Go easy, will you?"

"What're you trying to do, keep me on an allowance?"

"Whose money is it, anyway?"

"If it wasn't for me you—"

There was a warning "Sh!" followed by, "Don't forget the old

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lady ain't by herself out there no more."

The sudden restraint spoke more eloquently than any reckless revelation could have. Janet Miller's eyes were on Casement's face. He gave not the slightest sign of having heard anything that surprised him.

Haggard went out to get the car and brought it around to the front door. Vera came out, threw Casement a careless "You know what to do," and got in. They drove off.

Almost before they were out of sight down the long tree-lined street, he'd got up and gone inside. Not hurriedly or furtively—simply as though he had something to do that couldn't be postponed any longer.

He stayed in there a long time. She could hear him first in one room, then in another. He seemed to go through the entire house upstairs and down while he was about it.

She could hear a drawer slide open from time to time, or a desk flap being let down. If it hadn't been for that peculiar, inexplicable confidence with which he seemed to inspire her, she might have thought him a burglar who had taken the job for just such an opportunity to ransack the house in its owners' absence. Somehow the idea never occurred to her.

He came back outside again finally, after almost an hour, shaking his head slightly to himself. He sat down beside her, reached into his inside pocket, and took out a little oblong book—a pocket dictionary.

"You and I have got to find some way of getting beyond *yes* and *no*," he murmured. "I'd like to talk to you. That's why I wangled this job."

He glanced out between the porch posts, across the front lawn, up and down the sunny street. There was no one in sight. He took something from his vest pocket. Janet Miller thought it was a watch for a minute, until she saw that it was shield-shaped, not round. It had the State seal engraved on it. He let her see it, then put it away again.

"I'm a detective," he said. "I came up here and examined the premises immediately after it happened, just in the line of duty. Mrs. Haggard, as I at first reconstructed it, was awakened by the gas, managed to stagger down to the floor below, break the glass pane in the front door, then get over to the phone to try and call for help. She only had strength left to take the receiver off, then fell down with it and was found there on the floor by the telephone, overcome.

"However, I happened to question the switchboard operator who had sent in the alarm, and she insisted it was the other way around. She distinctly heard the crash of glass, over the open wire, *after* the receiver was already off. That made it a little hard to understand.

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"That was a plate-glass inset in that door, not just thin window glass. She had to swing a heavy andiron at it to shatter it. Now if a person is not even strong enough to whisper 'Help' over the phone, how in the world is she able to crash out a solid square of plate glass?

"Furthermore, once she was at the door, why did she turn around and go all the way back to the phone, which was already disconnected, and fall down *there?* It wasn't at the door she was found, you understand, it was at the *phone.*

"As peculiar as that struck me, I think I would have let it go by, but I visited the hospital while she was there being treated and asked to see her things. The light satin bedroom slippers she'd had on were discolored around the edges from dew, and I found traces of moist earth and a blade of grass adhering to their soles. She'd been *outside the house* before she was overcome, then went in again, closed the door after her, and smashed the glass panel in it from the inside.

"Then on top of all that the usual neighborhood gossip has begun to drift in to us—about how soon afterwards she and Haggard were married. Even an anonymous letter or two. I tell you all this because, although this is going to be one of the toughest cases I've ever come up against, I think you may be able to help me before we're through."

She could hardly breathe. The flame leaped heavenward and she blinked her eyes twice—*yes*—as rapidly as she could.

"Then there *is* something you can tell me about it? Good. Well, the main thing I want to know is: did he lose his life accidentally or not?"

No!

He gave her a long look. But she could see there was really no surprise in it, only confirmation. He thumbed the pocket dictionary, put his thumbnail below a word, and held it up to her.

"Murder," it read.

Yes.

"By his wife?" His mouth was tightening up a little.

She stopped and thought a moment. If she once set him off on a false scent, or on a partially correct scent, which was just as bad, there might be no possible way for her to correct him later.

She blinked twice. Then after a pause she blinked once.

"Yes and no?" he said. "What do you mean by . . . ?"

Then he got it! He was turning out to be a smart young man, this ally of hers, this Casement. "His wife *and* somebody else?"

Yes.

"Haggard and your son's wife then, of course."

Yes.

"But—" he said uncertainly. "She was overcome herself."

No.

"She wasn't overcome?"

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No.

"But I've seen the report of the ambulance doctor who treated her. I've spoken to him. She was taken to the hospital."

They wasted the rest of the morning over that. She wasn't particularly interested in convincing him that Vera's gas poisoning had been feigned—as a matter of fact, it had only been partially so—but she was vitally interested in keeping him from going past that point, in order to try to bring the gas masks into it. Once he did, she might never again be able to make him understand what method had been used.

They went at it again in the afternoon, on the back porch. "There's something that seems to be holding us up. How is it you're so sure she wasn't overcome? You were overcome yourself—sorry, I forgot, I can only ask you questions that call for a *yes* or *no* answer."

He was plainly stumped for a while. He took some papers from his pocket, reports or jotted notes of some kind, and pored over them for a few minutes.

"He and she were occupying that same room, up there, that the Haggards are using now. You insist she wasn't overcome by the gas. Oh, I see what you mean—she saved herself by doing what I suspected from the looks of those bedroom slippers —stayed outside while the gas was escaping, then came back inside again after it had killed your son, avoiding most of its effects in that way. Is that right?"

No.

"She didn't save herself in that way?"

No.

"Did she stay in another room upstairs, with the windows open?"

No.

He was plainly confounded. "She didn't stay in the same room with him, the back bedroom, the whole time the gas was escaping?"

Yes.

He riffled his hair distractedly. She focused her eyes downward on the pocket dictionary he still held in his hand and glared at it as though it were her worst enemy.

Finally he translated the look. "Something in there. Yes, but what word in it?" he asked helplessly.

Why didn't he open it? If he didn't hurry up and open it, he'd lose the thread of the conversation that had immediately preceded her inspiration. She didn't even know whether the word was in there. If it was, she was counting on alphabetical progression.

"Well, we'll get it if it takes all week. She stayed right in the bedroom with him while he was asphyxiated. She wasn't harmed, you insist, and there's some word in here you want. Something about bedrooms?"

No.

"Something about windows?"

No.

"Something about the gas itself?"

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Yes.

He almost tore the little book in half to get to the G's.

"Gas. We'll take it from there on, all right?"

Instead of blinking, for once, she shut her eyes.

She was saying a prayer.

He started to run his finger down the page, querying her as he went.

"Gaseous?"

No.

"Gasket?"

No.

Suddenly he stopped. He'd seen it himself, automatically—she could tell by the flash of enlightenment that lit up his face.

"Gas mask! Why didn't I think of that myself! It's been as obvious as the nose on my face the whole time!"

Tears of happiness twinkled in her eyes.

"So she saved herself by using a gas mask."

Yes—yes—yes.

"Did she put one on you, too?"

Yes.

"Very smart angle, there. It would have been too obvious if they'd let you die with him. Who'd she get them from, Haggard?"

Yes.

"Was he here that night, while it was taking place?"

No.

"Too smart, eh? Well, he's an accessory just the same." He hitched his chair a little closer to her. "Now you want to see these people punished, of course, Mrs. Miller. He was your son."

How needless was the *yes* she gave him. The flame of vengeance was a towering pillar of fire now.

"You know they killed your son, and now I know it too. But I've got to have stronger evidence than that. And what other evidence is there but those two gas masks? Everything depends on whether I can recover them or not. You had one on, and she removed it before outsiders arrived, obviously. You must have been conscious at least for a short while after she removed it. Did you see what she did with them?"

Yes.

Technically, she hadn't, of course. But the answer was *yes* just the same, because she had heard beforehand what they intended doing with them.

"Swell," he breathed fervently, balling a fist. "I suppose we'll have a hard time getting it, but we'll keep at it until we do. Am I tiring you?" he broke off to ask solicitously. "We've got plenty of time, you know. I don't want to hurt you by all this excitement in one day."

Tiring her! The flame of vengeance burned so high, so white, so tireless within her that she could have gone on for hours. *No,* she signaled.

"All right. About what was done with them afterwards. Let's try a few short cuts. She hid them some place in the house?"

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No.

"I didn't think she would. It would've been too chancy. She hid them some place outside the house?"

Yes.

"Do you know where?"

Yes.

"But how could you? Excuse me. Let's see. Under one of the porches?"

No.

"The garage?"

She refused to answer *yes* or *no,* afraid once more of sending him off on a wrong trail and being unable to correct it later. He might leave her and go out there and start tearing the garage apart.

"Not the garage then?"

She still refused to answer.

"The garage no answer, and not the garage, no answer either." He got it. Thank heaven for creating smart young men. "The car?"

Yes.

"The one they've got now?"

No.

"They've bought that since. That's down here in my notes. A former car then. Did you hear them discussing it afterwards. Is that how you know?"

No.

"You weren't in a position to see it being done at the time, and you didn't hear them talking it over afterwards. You must have heard them discussing it beforehand then."

Yes.

His face lit up. "That explains the whole thing. How it is you're so hep to what went on. Did they know you overheard them?"

She couldn't afford to tell him the truth on that one. It might weaken his credulity. But she was convinced they hadn't deviated in the slightest from the plan she had heard them shape in the kitchen that afternoon, anyhow. *No,* was her response.

"She doesn't drive." He'd learned that already, probably by watching them come and go. "He came and took the car away for her, then, with the masks still in it? That it?"

She didn't answer.

"I see. He sent someone else up to get it, probably without taking him into their confidence. Therefore the masks must have been concealed in it, and he got them out at the other end without being observed."

Yes.

"He owned a garage and repair shop, didn't he, before his marriage?" He didn't ask her that, just looked it up in his notes. "Yes, here it is. Ajax Garage and Service Station, Clifford Avenue. I'm going down there and look around. There's not much chance that those two masks haven't been destroyed by now. But there is a chance—and a good one—that they were imperfectly destroyed.

"If I can just turn up sufficient remnants identifiable as having belonged to one or more gas masks—

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scraps of metal even—that'll do the trick.

"You've told me all you can, Mrs. Miller, reconstructed the whole thing for me. The rest depends entirely on whether or not I can recover those two masks, intact or in fragments."

He put the jotted notes and the pocket dictionary back into his coat. "We may get the two of them yet, Mrs. Miller," he promised softly, as he stood up.

The flame of vengeance roared rejoicingly in her own ears. Her eyes were on him meltingly. He seemed to understand what they were trying to say. But then who could have failed to understand when they were so eloquent?

"Don't thank me," he murmured deprecatingly. "It's just part of my job."

Two days went by. He was there to look after her as usual, so he must have been pursuing his investigations at night, after leaving the house, she figured. More than once, when he appeared in the mornings, he looked particularly tired, dozed there on the porch beside her, while her eyes fondly gave his sleeping face their blessing.

There is no hurry, take your time, my right arm, my sword of retribution, she encouraged him silently.

He didn't tell her what success he was having, although the Haggards were out as much as ever and there was plenty of opportunity. It was hard to read his face, to tell whether he was being successful or not. Her eyes clung to him imploringly now, as much as they had ever clung to Vern Miller.

"You want to know, don't you?" he said at last. "You're eating your heart out waiting to find out, and it'd be cruel to keep you guessing any longer. Well—I haven't had any luck so far. Their car's still there in the garage, held for sale. I practically pulled it apart and put it together again, posing as a prospective buyer. Not while he was around, of course. The masks aren't in it any more.

"What's more to the point, no one around the garage, no one of the employees, saw him take them out to dispose of them, or saw them at all. I've questioned them all and I haven't any doubts on that score. I've searched the garage from top to bottom, sifted ashes, refuse, débris, in every vacant lot for blocks around. I've examined the premises where Haggard lived before he moved in here. Not a sign of anything."

He was walking restlessly back and forth between the veranda posts while he spoke.

"Damn the luck anyway!" he spat out. "Those things are bulky. They can't just be made to vanish into thin air. Even if he used corrosive acid, nothing could disappear that thoroughly. He didn't take them out over deep water, send

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them down to the bottom, because I've checked back on his movements thoroughly. He hasn't been on any ferries or boats, or near any docks or bridges. Where did they come from, where did they go?"

He stopped short, looked at her. "That's it!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that before? If I can't find out where they went to, maybe I can find out where they came from. I may have better luck if I go at it the other way around. You don't just pick up things like that at the five-and-ten. Did you hear him say where he got them from, when you heard them planning the thing?"

Yes, she answered eagerly.

"Did he buy them?"

No.

"Was he given them?"

No.

"Did he steal them?"

Yes.

"From a factory where they're made?"

No.

"From an Army post?"

No.

He scratched his head. "Where else could he get hold of things like that? From some friend, somebody he knew?"

Yes.

"That doesn't help much. Who is he? Where'd *he* get them from?"

She stared intently at the morning sun, blinked twice, then her eyes sought his.

Then she did it again.

Then a third time.

"I don't get you. The sun? He got them from the sun?"

This time she looked slightly lower than the sun, midway between it and the horizon.

"The East?" he caught on.

Yes.

"But we're in the East already. Oh—Europe?"

Yes.

"Wait a minute, I know what you mean now. He swiped them from someone who brought them back from there."

Yes.

"That does it!" he cried elatedly. "Now I know how I'll find out who he is! Through the Customs office. He had to declare those things, especially if he brought in several with him at once. They'll be down on his Customs declaration. Now I see too why I haven't been able to find any traces of them in ash heaps or refuse dumps. He must be holding them intact somewhere, waiting his chance to return them, if he hasn't already. He'll try to get them back unnoticed—that would be the smartest thing he could do. At last I think we've got a lead, Mrs. Miller—if only it isn't too late!"

The telephone rang out shrilly in the almost total darkness of the room. Casement pushed back his cuff, glanced at the radium dial of his wrist watch. A quarter to twelve. He didn't move, just let it

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keep on ringing until it had stopped again of its own accord.

He had an idea who it was—trying to find out for sure if there was anyone in this particular house or not. He guessed that if he answered it he wouldn't hear anything—just a click at the other end, and then his scheme would have been a failure.

"Not taking any chances, is he?" he grunted to himself. "Even though by now he must have gotten that post card in Hamilton's handwriting I had routed through Boston."

He was longing for a smoke, but he knew better than to indulge in one. The slightest little thing, such as a lighted cigarette glimpsed through the dark windows of this supposedly untenanted house could ruin the whole carefully prepared setup. He'd worked too hard and patiently to have that happen now.

He looked at his watch again presently. A quarter after now—half an hour had gone by.

"Due any minute now," he murmured.

Within the next thirty seconds the soft purr of a car running in low sounded from outside. It slowed a little as it came opposite the house, but neither veered in nor stopped. Instead, it went on past toward the next corner, like a ghost under the pale street lights.

Casement smiled grimly as he recognized it. It would go around the block, reconnoitering, then come by a second time and stop. Its occupant was taking every possible precaution but the right one—staying away from here altogether.

The showdown was imminent. Casement finally left the big wing chair he'd sat in ever since dusk, felt for the gun on his hip, and moved noiselessly out into the hall. He went back behind the stairs, where there was a door leading into a small storeroom built into the staircase structure itself.

He disappeared in there just as the whirr of wheels approached outside once more, from the same direction as before. This time they stopped. There was a brief wait, then a furtive footfall from the porch. A key turned in the lock.

Casement nodded to himself at the sound. "Swiped Hamilton's key, evidently. Took a wax impression for a duplicate, and then got it back to him somehow. That's how he got them out of here in the first place."

The door opened and a little gray light from the street filtered into the inky front hall. Through a hairline door-crack at the back of the stairs Casement could make out a looming silhouette standing there, listening. It was empty-handed, but that was all right. He was just taking every precaution.

The silhouette widened the door-opening. Then it bent down, scanning the three-days' accumulation of dummy mail Casement had care-

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fully planted just inside the door, under Hamilton's letter slot. There was also a quart bottle of milk that he'd bought at a dairy standing outside.

The inked-in figure straightened, turned around, and descended from the porch again, leaving the door open the way it was. Casement wasn't worried; he didn't stir.

There was another wait. Again the porch creaked. The silhouette was back again, this time with a square object like a small-sized suitcase in one hand. The door closed after it and everything became dark again.

Cautious footfalls came along the carpeted hall toward the staircase. They didn't go up it but came on toward the back. He was feeling his way, smart enough not to put on the lights or even use a flashlight or match in the supposedly untenanted house.

The storeroom door under the stairs that Casement had gone through opened softly. Still nothing happened. There was the sound of something being set down on the floor. Then the sound of two small suitcase latches clicking open one after the other. Then a great rattling of paper being undone, followed by something scratchy being lifted out of the paper.

There were hooks along the wall in there, with various seldom-used things hanging from them. Golf bag, cased tennis rackets—and gas masks that Hamilton had brought back from Europe as souvenirs.

An arm groped upward along the wall, feeling for a vacant hook. Casement had left two conveniently unburdened for just this situation.

The other found it, by sense of touch alone. The arm dipped down again toward the floor, came up with something in it that rustled—and then suddenly there was a sharp metallic click in the stillness of the enclosed little space.

There was a gasp of terror as something dropped with a thud to the floor. A bulb went on overhead, lighting up the place wanly.

Haggard and Casement were standing there face to face, across an upended trunk belonging to the house's owner.

Haggard was on the outside of it, the detective on the inside, but they were already linked inextricably across the top of it by handcuffs whose steel jaws had been waiting there in the dark for Haggard to reach toward that empty hook—waiting like bait in a trap.

An olive-drab gas mask lay at Haggard's feet. A second one still nestled in the small suitcase by the storeroom door, waiting to be transferred.

"Pretty," was all Casement said. "It's taken a long time and a lot of work, but it was worth it!"

He glanced down at the torn half of a cardboard tag still attached to the handle of the suitcase. "So that's

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where you had them hidden all the time I was looking for them. Checked in a parcel room somewhere under a phony name, waiting for Hamilton to be away and the coast clear so you could smuggle them back in again unseen. Not a bad idea—if it had only worked."

The sky was blue, the sun was bright, and Janet Miller sat there in her chair on the front porch. She looked at the man and the woman standing before her, each handcuffed to a detective, and the flame within her blazed triumphant.

"Take a look at this woman, whose son you murdered," Casement said grimly. "Face those eyes if you can—and deny it."

They couldn't. Haggard's head fell before the old lady's gaze. Vera averted hers. The two of them shifted weight uncomfortably.

"You'll see her again. She'll be the principal witness against you—along with Hamilton and his two gas masks. Take them away, boys." He turned her chair around so she could watch them go.

"I guess you wonder how I knew just which night he'd show up there at Hamilton's house," he said to her. "I made sure it would be last night. I went to Hamilton, told him the whole story, and he agreed to help me. He went to Boston, mailed Haggard a post card from there the day before yesterday. He said he was staying until today. That made last night the only night Haggard would supposedly have a chance to get those masks back in the house unseen. I faked some mail and filled the letterbox with it, and stood a bottle of milk at the door. He fell for it."

An important-looking white-haired man came out of the house, went over to Casement, and put his hand on his shoulder. "Great work," he said. "You sure sewed that one up—and single-handed at that!"

Casement motioned toward Janet Miller. "I was just an auxiliary. Here's where the thanks and the credit go."

"Who'll look after her until the trial comes up?" the Captain asked.

"Why, I guess there's room enough over in our house," Casement said.

The sky was blue, the sun was warm, and her eyes shone softly as they rested on him. She had three things to live for again.

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Meet Sir Ordwey Temple, a dilettante detective of the old school (and of the old school tie), who is jolly good at solvin' any unnatural death or little unpleasantness which may come his way, and with a 'tec technique which, it must be admitted, is rich, not gaudy . . .

SIR ORDWEY VIEWS THE BODY

by RHODA LYS STOREY

THE SLEEK DAIMLER PURRED through Much Deener Forest in Surrey. At the wheel, driving with practiced ease, and, it must be admitted, unusual restraint, was an elegant gentleman with straw-colored hair. Next to him sat an attractive young woman, while the back of the car was occupied by an impeccable manservant and a dozen of especially fine port. These last, in fact, were the reason that Sir Ordwey Temple was not driving at his usual breakneck speed.

Without warning, however, he slewed to the side of the road and jammed on his brakes with such force that the valet cried out in anguish, "The port, sir, the port!"

The cause of this apparent heedlessness was an ancient Rolls-Royce rammed into a tree. It seemed to be sitting thus, its front horribly crinkled, with an air that said, "Such things can't happen to *me!*"

Sir Ordwey got out to investigate, his companion, Vera Arneith, close behind him. Sitting stiffly erect in the back seat of the Rolls was a tiny old lady. She, like the Rolls, seemed to convey the impression that she was not the sort to whom violence and damage could happen, but, again as in the case of the Rolls, it had happened nonetheless. A large knife was protruding from her flat and withered bosom, and she was quite dead.

"But recent," Sir Ordwey pointed out to Vera. "She's still warm. Looks bad for the chauffeur."

"What chauffeur?" asked Vera. "Oh, yes, silly of me. Little old ladies don't go about driving their own Rolls-Royces."

"Got it in one," agreed the flaxen-haired man. He was busily nosing about on the floor of the car. "Look at this powdery white dust. An absolutely smashin' clue! An' see," he continued, whipping out the magnifying glass he always carried, "there are traces of the powder on the steering wheel. *And,"* he finished triumphantly, examining the outside, "here's some on the right rear door. All we need is a dusty chauffeur and the case is solved. Wouldn't Clarke Sharper be proud of me!"

He was referring to a C.I.D. Inspector who was a close friend and

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with whom he had amicably tackled many cases; Sharper was also his brother-in-law, by virtue of having married Sir Ordwey's sister, Myra.

"But, Ordwey," asked Vera, "what *is* that dust?"

"Dunno yet," Sir Ordwey answered blithely, "but I'll find out." And he patted his coat pocket in which already reposed an envelope containing a sample of the dust. "Still," he muttered thoughtfully under his breath, "it isn't all that clear. Something's wrong. Now what is it?"

The pair returned to the Daimler, and once more Sir Ordwey slid behind the wheel. "Truben," the driver turned to face his valet, who had missed little that had taken place, "you haven't said a word. What do you make of it?"

"If I may venture to say so, sir, a number of possibilities present themselves."

"Oh, indeed?"

"The vehicle might have been in mechanical difficulties, sir, and the chauffeur gone for help. And the lady attacked while he was gone."

"Right as usual, my Truben. So now we look for a dusty anybody. *If* he hasn't brushed the dust off. By the way, no one's asked, but I thought I'd tell you. She was robbed too. No purse about, don't y'know."

And with that he tootled carefully down the road and onto the high street of the village of Much Deener. The first stop they came to had a sign which read: *Grocer.* Here they pulled up—most gently, of course, out of consideration for the port.

Inside the shop was the harassed and aproned proprietor, who gave his name as Mat Yuling, and a black-clad, immaculately uniformed man who had every appearance of being the missing chauffeur.

"'Strewth!" the latter exclaimed when he heard of what had happened down the road. His distress appeared to be heartfelt and genuine, though it was difficult to tell how much was for his mistress and how much for the smashed-up automobile.

"Your phone," Sir Ordwey said loudly, and for the third time, to the little grocer.

"Sorry, sir, very sorry indeed," the little man exclaimed in a flustered way. "It's just one of those mornings, sir. I'm upset, and that's a fact. First, the boy doesn't show up to make the deliveries—sick, *he* says—and then one of the shipments comes all damaged and messy. And the post has just arrived. Bills and more bills, and my customers won't pay up, and what am *I* to do?"

"Just show me the phone," said Sir Ordwey patiently. "Truben, you call the police while I talk to the chauffeur here."

That worthy, who gave his name as Rufe Haufetch, explained first how he had left matters by the roadside. "Ran right out of petrol, I did," he said. "And no use going back to

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the 'ouse, I'd no more there either. So I walked into town—it's not far, as you can see, sir—and obtained some down the street. 'Ere it is too," he added, indicating an unmistakeable can of petrol on the floor.

"Then I called in 'ere, 'cos cook wanted some things and we knew as how Mat's delivery boy was took sick. But Mat 'ere tells me 'e delivered the stuff 'isself, so I was just leaving when you came. Right as rain I left 'er ladyship, sir.

"But, sir," he added in a different tone, "is—is the Rolls very bad, sir?"

Sir Ordwey made indeterminate soothing noises, and at length was able to extract more information from the chauffeur.

He learned that the dead woman, whose name was Lucie Pitcords, was by way of being the local dowager. The large manor house they had passed shortly before finding the stranded car was hers. Twice widowed, she lived with a rather profligate son by her first marriage, Foster Poligan, and a niece-companion who was also a sort of secretary, Rae St. Ryce. Relations were none too cordial between the lady and her dependents, for she was very close-fisted with her money.

The staff, in addition to the chauffeur, included his wife, who served as the housekeeper. "But, sir, she's ailing something terrible, and we don't even know what it is. But she's flat on her back, and she'd no 'and in this business." The rest of the staff consisted of the cook, butler, the parlormaid, all old retainers, and two locals from the village who helped out but did not sleep in.

"Ah, now we're getting on, said the sleuth," Sir Ordwey murmured. "Any of 'em—always excepting your wife, of course—could have reached the car on foot from the house, couldn't they? Why—"

"Ordwey, I've just thought of something," Vera interrupted. "Maybe one of them drained the petrol on purpose in order to strand the car and put the old lady at his or her mercy."

"Could be, could be, m'love. And yet, my thoughts take a different tack entirely. The running out of petrol could be tied in with the sick housekeeper, don't y'know.

"You hit one nail square on the head though. Running out of petrol, when the chauffeur is so obviously dedicated to his calling, is indeed a Suspicious Circumstance. But his wife's so sick, d'you see, he may be a bit preoccupied."

"That's it, sir," agreed the chauffeur eagerly. "I'd never let a thing like that 'appen in the ordinary way, and not 'alf put out 'er ladyship wasn't."

"Hmm," said the little grocer portentously, getting into the detective spirit, "looks pretty bad for the young lady and gentleman up to the manor."

"Why, no," said Sir Ordwey coolly, and just a shade menacingly. Thoughtfully he rubbed his hand

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up and down the white apron that covered the grocer's front, and his hand came away white. "I rather fancy the case is solved, and it looks bad for *you.*"

"But, Ordwey," said Vera, when they were once again buzzing along, still taking it gently because of the port, "how did you get it all, just like that?"

"Oh, the clues abounded, dear girl. That silly little man gave us motive, opportunity, *and* an explanation of the white dust all in one breath. And I only asked him for the telephone," he added thoughtfully. "Ought to be a moral there, though I'm dashed if I see it.

"Anyhow," he continued more briskly. "First there was that white dust—and what a story it told! From its position on the rear car door and on the steering wheel, we deduce it was most probably on the murderer's front. But the dusty one had opened the *right-hand* rear door. A chauffeur, in this automotively inverted land of ours, opens the left-hand door, if he wants his mistress to think he's acting naturally. That was the wrongness I sensed when I was still suspectin' the chauffeur.

"Then we went into the grocer's, and there was the chauffeur all in black, and white dust would have been *so* noticeable, and there wasn't a trace. Just idly, it occurred to me that white dust on the grocer's white apron wouldn't show at all. I wasn't serious, of course, at that point, but I did just think that powdery white dust might well be flour, the very thing you'd expect a grocer to have. And when he told us a shipment of goods had bust, I wondered if it mightn't be bags of flour. And then he really did tear it. He told us he was frantic over money.

"Have you ever noticed how these dear old dowagers can get away for so long not paying their bills? Not ordinary folk, no, but the ones with money and titles, nobody dares to ask 'em for it. And this particular lady, we're told, was one of the mean ones who didn't like to part with her shillings and pence. I think the robbery was just a little bonus, mind you; the main thing was that the grocer chap figured, all in a flash, that if the old gal was dead they'd pay up her creditors, and then he could pay up *his* creditors.

"He really put the lid on it when he told us he'd been out making the deliveries himself. The chauffeur told us the grocer had been to the manor house. My guess is that the grocer saw the stranded car on his way back to his shop, all nice and neat and helpless by the roadside. He may have stopped to offer help, and when he found the old lady all alone he saw a way out of his troubles. Especially since he had a knife with him—probably one he used in his shop."

"But how did the car get smashed?"

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"That's what really made me rule out the chauffeur," said Sir Ordwey. "The grocer ran the car off the road to try an' put off discovery, I think—must have had some spare petrol in his own bus—and went bung into a tree. Now I had the feelin' that the chauffeur wasn't too upset at the old lady being' done in—but the Rolls! That really shook him. He'd never have harmed that.

"Besides, Vera," he added plaintively, "you're slippin'. I thought sure you'd spot the feller's name. Stares you in the face."

Vera was silent a moment, and then exclaimed, "Good lord, yes. How right you are!"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Sir Ordwey Temple and Vera Arneith are great ones for anagrams and word play—at least, they are in the more familiar arrangement of their "real" names. For, as you no doubt realized from the beginning:

Sir Ordwey Temple=Lord Peter Wimsey
Vera Arneith=Harriet Vane

Lord Peter's reference to the grocer-murderer is, of course, another anagram:

Mat Yuling=guilty man

and surely you recognized at once Lord Peter's indispensable valet:

Truben=Bunter

and Lord Peter's sister and brother-in-law:

Myra=Mary
Clarke Sharper=Charles Parker

As in previous stories, other anagrams are strewn about—none of which probably fooled you:

Much Deemer Forest=scene of the murder
Lucie Pitchords=corpus delicti (Lord Peter, you know, is fond of Latin)
Rufe Haufetch=the chauffeur
Foster Poligan=profligate son
Rae St. Ryce=secretary

All this being so, it is easy to see that the author's name is also an anagram:

Rhoda Lys Storey=Dorothy L. Sayers

whose inimitable brand of "Wimsey" inspired this deeply respectful pastiche.

—NORMA SCHIER

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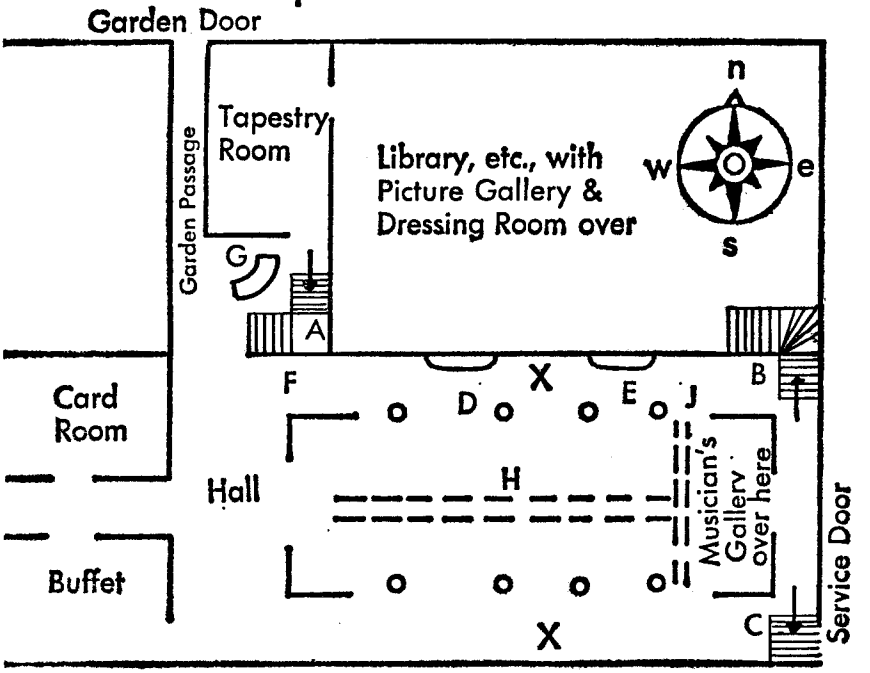
Map of The Ballroom



A: Stair to Dressing Room and Gallery.
B: Stair to Gallery.
C: Stair to Musicians' Gallery only.
D: Settee where Joan Carstairs sat.
E: Settee where Jim Playfair sat.
F. Where Waits stood.
G: Where Ephraim Dodd sat.
H: Guests' "Sir Roger."
J: Servants' "Sir Roger."
XX: Hanging Lanterns.
OOO: Arcading.

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Now that you have read Norma Schier's pastiche, we give you what might be called "the real McSayers"—in which the real Lord Peter Wimsey finds himself enmeshed (and so will you be) in a complicated murder that occurred during a Christmas ball highlighted by the dancing of the traditional "Sir Roger de Coverley," with all the guests dressed in fancy costumes representing games and tripping the light fantastic to the accompaniment of the waits singing carols. It is a detective story that only a British writer could have written, and you'll need all your wits—but we can tell you, without spoiling the story a bit, that knowing who was where when is not the vital clue at all!

It happens that "The Queen's Square" (an inspired title) is one of Norma Schier's favorite stories about Lord Peter Wimsey; it was also the favorite Lord Peter story of Norbert Lederer, once a collaborator of S. S. Van Dine on the Philo Vance novels—and surely Lord Peter and Philo Vance are cousins-under-the-skin!

THE QUEEN'S SQUARE

by DOROTHY L. SAYERS

"You jack o' di'monds, you jack o' Di'monds," said Mark Sambourne, shaking a reproachful head, "I know you of old." He rummaged beneath the white satin of his costume, paneled with gigantic oblongs and spotted to represent a set of dominoes. "Hang this fancy rig! Where the blazes has the fellow put my pockets? You rob my pocket, yes, you rob-a my pocket, you rob my pocket of silver and go-ho-hold. How much do you make it?" He extracted a fountain pen and a check book.

"Five-seventeen-six," said Lord Peter Wimsey. "That's right, isn't it, partner?" His huge blue-and-scarlet sleeves rustled as he turned to Lady Hermione Creethorpe, who, in her Queen of Clubs costume, looked a very redoubtable virgin, as, indeed, she was.

"Quite right," said the old lady, "and I consider that very cheap."

"We haven't been playing long," said Wimsey apologetically.

"It would have been more, Auntie," observed Mrs. Wrayburn, "if you hadn't been greedy. You shouldn't have doubled those four spades of mine."

Lady Hermione snorted, and Wimsey hastily cut in.

"It's a pity we've got to stop, but Deverill will never forgive us if

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we're not there to dance Sir Roger. He feels strongly about it. What's the time? Twenty past one. Sir Roger is timed to start sharp at half-past. I suppose we'd better tootle back to the ballroom."

"I suppose we had," agreed Mrs. Wrayburn. She stood up, displaying her dress, boldly patterned with the red and black points of a backgammon board. "It's very good of you," she added, as Lady Hermione's voluminous skirts swept through the hall ahead of them, "to chuck your dancing to give Auntie her bridge. She does so hate to miss it."

"Not at all," replied Wimsey. "It's a pleasure. And in any case I was jolly glad of a rest. These costumes are dashed hot for dancing in."

"You make a splendid Jack of Diamonds, though. Such a good idea of Lady Deverill's, to make everybody come as a game. It cuts out all those wearisome pierrots and columbines."

They skirted the southwest angle of the ballroom and emerged into the south corridor, lit by a great hanging lantern in four lurid colors. Under the arcading they paused and stood watching the floor, where Sir Charles Deverill's guests were fox-trotting to a lively tune discoursed by the band in the musicians' gallery at the far end. "Hullo, Giles!" added Mrs. Wrayburn, "you look hot."

"I am hot," said Giles Pomfret. "I wish to goodness I hadn't been so clever about this infernal costume. It's a beautiful billard table, but I can't sit down in it." He mopped his heated brow, crowned with an elegant green lamp shade. "The only rest I can get is to hitch my behind on a radiator, and as they're all in full blast, it's not very cooling. Thank goodness, I can always make these damned sandwich boards an excuse to get out of dancing." He propped himself against the nearest column, looking martyred.

"Nina Hartford comes off best," said Mrs. Wrayburn. "Water polo—so sensible—just a bathing suit and a ball; though I must say it would look better on a less *Restoration* figure. You playing cards are much the prettiest, and I think the chess pieces run you close. There goes Gerda Bellingham, dancing with her husband—isn't she *too* marvelous in that red wig? And the bustle and everything—my dear, so attractive. I'm glad they didn't make themselves too Lewis Carroll; Charmian Grayle is the sweetest White Queen—where is she, by the way?"

"I don't like that young woman," said Lady Hermione; "she's fast."

"Dear lady!"

"I've no doubt you think me old-fashioned. Well, I'm glad I am. I say she's fast, and, what's more, heartless. I was watching her before supper, and I'm sorry for Tony Lee. She's been flirting as hard as she can with Harry Vibart—not to

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give it a worse name—and she's got Jim Playfair on a string, too. She can't even leave Frank Bellingham alone, though she's staying in his house."

"Oh, I say, Lady H!" protested Sambourne, "you're a bit hard on Miss Grayle. I mean, she's an awfully sporting kid and all that."

"I detest that word 'sporting'," snapped Lady Hermione. "Nowadays it merely means drunk and disorderly. And she's not such a kid either, young man. In three years' time she'll be a hag, if she goes on at this rate."

"Dear Lady Hermione," said Wimsey, "we can't all be untouched by time, like you."

"You could," retorted the old lady, "if you looked after your stomachs and your morals. Here comes Frank Bellingham—looking for a drink, no doubt. Young people today seem to be positively pickled in gin."

The fox trot had come to an end, and the Red King was threading his way toward them through a group of applauding couples.

"Hullo, Bellingham!" said Wimsey. "Your crown's crooked. Allow me." He set wig and headdress to rights with skillful fingers. "Not that I blame you. What crown is safe these days?"

"Thanks," said Bellingham. "I say, I want a drink."

"What did I tell you?" said Lady Hermione.

"Buzz along, then, old man," said Wimsey. "You've got four minutes. Mind you turn up in time for Sir Roger."

"Right you are. Oh, I'm dancing it with Gerda, by the way. If you see her, you might tell her where I've gone to."

"We will. Lady Hermione, you're honoring me, of course?"

"Nonsense! You're not expecting me to dance at my age? The Old Maid ought to be a wallflower."

"Nothing of the sort. If only I'd had the luck to be born earlier, you and I should have appeared side by side, as Matrimony. Of course you're going to dance it with me—unless you mean to throw me over for one of these youngsters."

"I've no use for youngsters," said Lady Hermione. "No guts. Spindleshanks." She darted a swift glance at Wimsey's scarlet hose. "You at least have some suggestion of calves. I can stand up with you without blushing for you."

Wimsey bowed his scarlet cap and curled wig in deep reverence over the gnarled knuckles extended to him.

"You make me the happiest of men. We'll show them all how to do it. Right hand, left hand, both hands across, back to back, round you go and up the middle. There's Deverill going down to tell the band to begin. Punctual old bird, isn't he? Just two minutes to go . . . What's the matter, Miss Carstairs? Lost your partner?"

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"Yes—have you seen Tony Lee anywhere?"

"The White King? Not a sign. Nor the White Queen either. I expect they're together somewhere."

"Probably. Poor old Jimmie Playfair is sitting patiently in the north corridor, looking like Casabianca."

"You'd better go along and console him," said Wimsey, laughing.

Joan Carstairs made a face and disappeared in the direction of the buffet, just as Sir Charles Deverill, giver of the party, bustled up to Wimsey and his companions, resplendent in a Chinese costume patterned with red and green dragons, bamboos, circles, and characters, and carrying on his shoulder a stuffed bird with an enormous tail.

"Now, now," he exclaimed, "come along, come along! All ready for Sir Roger. Got your partner, Wimsey? Ah, yes, Lady Hermione—splendid. You must come and stand next to your dear mother and me, Wimsey. Don't be late, don't be late. We want to dance it right through. The waits will begin at two o'clock—I hope they will arrive in good time. Dear me, dear me! Why aren't the servants in yet? I told Watson—I must go and speak to him."

He darted away, and Wimsey, laughing, led his partner up to the top of the room, where his mother, the Dowager Duchess of Denver, stood waiting, magnificent as the Queen of Spades.

"Ah, here you are," said the Duchess placidly. "Dear Sir Charles—he was getting quite flustered. Such a man for punctuality—he ought to have been a Royalty. A delightful party, Hermione, isn't it? Sir Roger and the waits—quite medieval—and a Yule log in the hall, with the steam radiators and everything—so oppressive!"

"Tumty, tumty, tiddledy, tumty, tumty, tiddledy" sang Lord Peter, as the band broke into the old tune. "I do adore this music. Foot it featly here and there—oh, there's Gerda Bellingham. Just a moment! Mrs. Bellingham—hi! your royal spouse awaits your Red Majesty's pleasure in the buffet. Do hurry him up. He's only got half a minute."

The Red Queen smiled at him, her pale face and black eyes startlingly brilliant beneath her scarlet wig and crown.

"I'll bring him up to scratch all right," she said, and passed on, laughing.

"So she will," said the Dowager. "You'll see that young man in the Cabinet before very long. Such a handsome couple on a public platform, and very sound, I'm told, about pigs, and that's so important, the British breakfast table being what it is."

Sir Charles Deverill, looking a trifle heated, came hurrying back and took his place at the head of the double line of guests, which now extended three-quarters of the way down the ballroom. At the lower end, just in front of the Musicians'

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Gallery, the staff had filed in, to form a second Sir Roger, at right angles to the main set. The clock chimed the half hour. Sir Charles, craning an anxious neck, counted the dancers.

"Eighteen couples. We're two couples short. How vexatious! Who are missing?"

"The Bellinghams?" said Wimsey. "No, they're here. It's the White King and Queen, and Badminton and Diabolo."

"There's Badminton!" cried Mrs. Wrayburn, signaling frantically across the room. "Jim! Jim! Bother! He's gone back again. He's waiting for Charmian Grayle."

"Well, we can't wait any longer," said Sir Charles peevishly. "Duchess, will you lead off?"

The Dowager obediently threw her black velvet train over her arm and skipped away down the center, displaying an uncommonly neat pair of scarlet ankles. The two lines of dancers, breaking into the hop-and-skip step of the country dance, jigged sympathetically. Below them, the cross lines of black and white and livery coats followed their example with respect. Sir Charles Deverill, dancing solemnly down after the Duchess, joined hands with Nina Hartford from the far end of the line. Tumty, tumty, tiddledy, tumty, tumty, tiddledy . . . the first couple turned outward and led the dancers down.

Wimsey, catching the hand of Lady Hermione, stooped with her beneath the arch and came triumphantly up to the top of the room, in a magnificent rustle of silk and satin. "My love," sighed Wimsey, "was clad in the black velvet, and I myself in cramoisie." The old lady, well pleased, rapped him over the knuckles with her gilt scepter. Hands clapped merrily.

"Down we go again," said Wimsey, and the Queen of Clubs and Emperor of the great Mahjongg dynasty twirled and capered in the center. The Queen of Spades danced up to meet her Jack of Diamonds. "Bézique," said Wimsey; "double Bézique," as he gave both his hands to the Dowager. Tumty, tumty, tiddledy. He again gave his hand to the Queen of Clubs and led her down. Under their lifted arms the other seventeen couples passed. Then Lady Deverill and her partner followed them down—then five more couples.

"We're working nicely to time," said Sir Charles, with his eye on the clock. "I worked it out at two minutes per couple. Ah, here's one of the missing pairs." He waved an agitated arm. "Come into the center —come along—in here."

A man whose head was decorated with a huge shuttlecock, and Joan Carstairs, dressed as a Diabolo, had emerged from the north corridor. Sir Charles, like a fussy rooster with two frightened hens, guided and pushed them into place between two couples who had not yet done their "hands across," and heaved a

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sigh of relief. It would have worried him to see them miss their turn. The clock chimed a quarter to two.

"I say, Playfair, have you seen Charmian Grayle or Tony Lee anywhere about?" asked Giles Pomfret of the Badminton costume. "Sir Charles is quite upset because we aren't complete."

"Not a sign of 'em. I was supposed to be dancing this with Charmian, but she vanished upstairs and hasn't come down again. Then Joan came barging along looking for Tony, and we thought we'd better see it through together."

"Here are the waits coming in," broke in Joan Carstairs. "Aren't they sweet? Too-too-truly-rural!"

Between the columns on the north side of the ballroom the waits could be seen filing into place in the corridor, under the command of the Vicar. Sir Roger jigged on his exhausting way. Hands across. Down the center and up again. Giles Pomfret, groaning, scrambled in his sandwich boards beneath the lengthening arch of hands for the fifteenth time. Tumty, tiddledy. The nineteenth couple wove their way through the dance.

Once again, Sir Charles and the Dowager Duchess, both as fresh as paint, stood at the top of the room. The clapping was loudly renewed; the orchestra fell silent; the guests broke up into groups; the servants arranged themselves in a neat line at the lower end of the room; the clock struck two; and the Vicar, receiving a signal from Sir Charles, held his tuning fork to his ear and gave forth a sonorous A. The waits burst shrilly into the opening bars of *Good King Wenceslas.*

It was just as the night was growing darker and the wind blowing stronger that a figure came thrusting its way through the ranks of the singers, and hurried across to where Sir Charles stood; Tony Lee, with his face as white as his costume.

"Charmian . . . in the tapestry room . . . dead . . . strangled."

Superintendent Johnson sat in the library, taking down the evidence of the haggard revelers, who were ushered in upon him one by one. First, Tony Lee, his haunted eyes like dark hollows in a mask of gray paper.

"Miss Grayle had promised to dance with me the last dance before Sir Roger; it was a fox trot. I waited for her in the passage under the Musicians' Gallery. She never came. I did not search for her. I did not see her dancing with anyone else. When the dance was nearly over, I went out into the garden, by way of the service door under the musicians' stair. I stayed in the garden till Sir Roger de Coverley was over—"

"Was anybody with you, sir?"

"No, nobody."

"You stayed alone in the garden from—yes, from one twenty to past two o'clock. Rather disagreeable, was it not, sir, with the snow on the

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ground?" The Superintendent glanced keenly from Tony's stained and sodden white shoes to his strained face.

"I didn't notice. The room was hot—I wanted air. I saw the waits arrive at about one forty—I daresay they saw me. I came in a little after two o'clock—"

"By the service door again, sir?"

"No; by the garden door on the other side of the house, at the end of the passage which runs along beside the tapestry room. I heard singing going on in the ballroom and saw two men sitting in the little recess at the foot of the staircase on the left-hand side of the passage. I think one of them was the gardener. I went into the Tapestry Room—"

"With any particular purpose in mind, sir?"

"No—except that I wasn't keen on rejoining the party. I wanted to be quiet." He paused; the Superintendent said nothing. "Then I went into the tapestry room. The light was out. I switched it on and saw—Miss Grayle. She was lying close against the radiator. I thought she had fainted. I went over to her and found she was—dead. I only waited long enough to be sure, and then I went into the ballroom and gave the alarm."

"Thank you, sir. Now, may I ask, what were your relations with Miss Grayle?"

"I—I admired her very much."

"Engaged to her, sir?"

"No, not exactly."

"No quarrel—misunderstanding—anything of that sort?"

"Oh, no!"

Superintendent Johnson looked at him again, and again said nothing, but his experienced mind informed him: "He's lying."

Aloud he only thanked and dismissed Tony. The White King stumbled drearily out, and the Red King took his place.

"Miss Grayle," said Frank Bellingham, "is a friend of my wife and myself; she was staying at our house. Mr. Lee is also our guest. We all came in one party. I believe there was some kind of understanding between Miss Grayle and Mr. Lee—no actual engagement. She was a very bright, lively, popular girl. I have known her for about six years, and my wife has known her since our marriage. I know of no one who could have borne a grudge against Miss Grayle. I danced with her the last dance but two—it was a waltz. After that came a fox trot and then Sir Roger.

"She left me at the end of the waltz; I think she said she was going upstairs to tidy. I think she went out by the door at the upper end of the ballroom. I never saw her again. The ladies' dressing room is on the second floor, next door to the picture gallery. You reach it by the staircase that goes up from the garden passage. You have to pass the door of the tapestry room to get there. The only other way to the dressing room is by the stair at the

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east end of the ballroom, which goes up to the picture gallery. You would then have to pass through the picture gallery to get to the dressing room. I know the house well; my wife and I have often stayed here."

Next came Lady Hermione, whose evidence, delivered at great length, amounted to this: "Charmian Grayle was a minx and no loss to anybody. I am not surprised that someone has strangled her. Women like that ought to be strangled. I would cheerfully have strangled her myself. She has been making Tony Lee's life a burden to him for the last six weeks. I saw her flirting with Mr. Vibart tonight on purpose to make Mr. Lee jealous. She made eyes at Mr. Bellingham and Mr. Playfair. She made eyes at everybody. I should think at least half a dozen people had very good reason to wish her dead."

Mr. Vibart, who arrived dressed in a gaudy Polo costume, and still ludicrously clutching a hobbyhorse, said that he had danced several times that evening with Miss Grayle. She was a damn sportin' girl, rattlin' good fun. Well, a bit hot perhaps, but, dash it all, the poor kid was dead. He might have kissed her once or twice, perhaps, but no harm in that. Well, perhaps poor old Lee did take it a bit hard. Miss Grayle liked pulling Tony's leg. He himself had liked Miss Grayle and was dashed cut-up about the whole beastly business.

Mrs. Bellingham confirmed her husband's evidence. Miss Grayle had been their guest, and they were all on the very best of terms. She felt sure that Mr. Lee and Miss Grayle had been very fond of one another. She had not seen Miss Grayle during the last three dances, but had attached no importance to that. If she had thought about it at all, she would have supposed Miss Grayle was sitting out with somebody. She herself had not been up to the dressing room since about midnight, and had not seen Miss Grayle go upstairs. She had first missed Miss Grayle when they all stood up for Sir Roger.

Mrs. Wrayburn mentioned that she had seen Miss Carstairs in the ballroom looking for Mr. Lee, just as Sir Charles Deverill went down to speak to the band. Miss Carstairs had then mentioned that Mr. Playfair was in the north corridor, waiting for Miss Grayle. She could say for certain that the time was then 1:28. She had seen Mr. Playfair himself at 1:30. He had looked in from the corridor and gone out again. The whole party had then been standing up together, except Miss Grayle, Miss Carstairs, Mr. Lee, and Mr. Playfair. She knew that, because Sir Charles had counted the couples.

Then came Jim Playfair, with a most valuable piece of evidence.

"Miss Grayle was promised to me for Sir Roger de Coverley. I went to wait for her in the north corridor as soon as the preceding dance was

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over. That was at one twenty-five. I sat on the settee in the eastern half of the corridor. I saw Sir Charles go down to speak to the band. Almost immediately afterward I saw Miss Grayle come out of the passage under the Musicians' Gallery and go up the stairs at the end of the corridor. I called out: 'Hurry up! they're just going to begin.' I do not think she heard me; she did not reply. I am quite sure I saw her. The staircase has open banisters. There is no light in that corner except from the swinging lantern in the corridor, but that is very powerful. I could not be mistaken in the costume. I waited for Miss Grayle till the dance was half over; then I gave it up and joined forces with Miss Carstairs, who had also mislaid her partner."

The maid in attendance in the dressing room was next examined. She and the gardener were the only two servants who had not danced Sir Roger. She had not quitted the dressing room at any time since supper, except that she might have gone as far as the door. Miss Grayle had certainly not entered the dressing room during the last hour of the dance.

The Vicar, much worried and distressed, said that his party had arrived by the garden door at 1:40. He had noticed a man in a white costume smoking a cigarette in the garden. The waits had removed their outer clothing in the garden passage and then gone out to take up their position in the north corridor. Nobody had passed them till Mr. Lee had come in with his sad news.

Mr. Ephraim Dodd, the sexton, made an important addition to this evidence. This aged gentleman was, as he confessed, no singer, but was accustomed to go round with the waits to carry the lantern and collecting box. He had taken a seat in the garden passage "to rest me pore feet." He had seen the gentleman come in from the garden "all in white with a crown on 'is 'ead." The choir was then singing *Bring me flesh and bring me wine*. The gentleman had looked about a bit, "made a face, like," and gone into the room at the foot of the stairs. He hadn't been absent "more nor a minute," when he "come out faster than he gone in," and had rushed immediately into the ballroom.

In addition to all this, there was, of course, the evidence of Dr. Pattison. He was a guest at the dance, and had hastened to view the body of Miss Grayle as soon as the alarm was given. He was of opinion that she had been brutally strangled by someone standing in front of her. She was a tall strong girl, and he thought it would have needed a man's strength to overpower her. When he saw her at 2:05 he concluded that she must have been killed within the last hour, but not within the last five minutes or so. The body was still quite warm, but, since it had fallen close to the hot

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radiator, they could not rely very much on that indication.

Superintendent Johnson rubbed a thoughtful ear and turned to Lord Peter Wimsey, who had been able to confirm much of the previous evidence and, in particular, the exact times at which various incidents had occurred. The Superintendent knew Wimsey well, and made no bones about taking him into his confidence.

"You see how it stands, my lord. If the poor young lady was killed when Dr. Pattison says, it narrows it down a good bit. She was last seen dancing with Mr. Bellingham at—call it one twenty. At two o'clock she was dead. That gives us forty minutes. But if we're to believe Mr. Playfair, it narrows it down still further. He says he saw her alive just after Sir Charles went down to speak to the band, which you put at one twenty-eight. That means that there's only five people who could possibly have done it, because all the rest were in the ballroom after that, dancing Sir Roger.

"There's the maid in the dressing room; between you and me, sir, I think we can leave her out. She's a little slip of a thing, and it's not clear what motive she could have had. Besides, I've known her from a child, and she isn't the sort to do it.

"Then there's the gardener; I haven't seen him yet, but there again, he's a man I know well, and I'd as soon suspect myself.

"Well now, there's this Mr. Tony Lee, Miss Carstairs, and Mr. Playfair himself. The girl's the least probable, for physical reasons, and besides, strangling isn't a woman's crime—not as a rule. But Mr. Lee—that's a queer story, if you like. What was he doing all that time out in the garden by himself?"

"It sounds to me," said Wimsey, "as if Miss Grayle had given him the push and he had gone into the garden to eat worms."

"Exactly, my lord; and that's where his motive might come in."

"So it might," said Wimsey, "but look here. There's a couple of inches of snow on the ground. If you can confirm the time at which he went out, you ought to be able to see, from his tracks, whether he came in again before Ephraim Dodd saw him. Also, where he went in the interval and whether he was alone."

"That's a good idea, my lord. I'll send my sergeant to make inquiries."

"Then there's Mr. Bellingham. Suppose he killed her after the end of his waltz with her. Did anyone see him in the interval between that and the fox trot?"

"Quite, my lord. I've thought of that. But you see where *that* leads. It means that Mr. Playfair must have been in a conspiracy with him to do it. And from all we hear, that doesn't seem likely."

"No more it does. In fact, I happen to know that Mr. Bellingham and Mr. Playfair were not on the

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best of terms. You can wash that out."

"I think so, my lord. And that brings us to Mr. Playfair. It's him we're relying on for the time. We haven't found anyone who saw Miss Grayle during the dance before his—that was the fox trot. What was to prevent him doing it then? Wait a bit. What does he say himself? Says he danced the fox trot with the Duchess of Denver." The Superintendent's face fell, and he hunted through his notes again. "She confirms that. Says she was with him during the interval and danced the whole dance with him. Well, my lord, I suppose we can take Her Grace's word for it."

"I think you can," said Wimsey, smiling. "I've known my mother practically since my birth, and have always found her very reliable."

"Yes, my lord. Well, that brings us to the end of the fox trot. After that, Miss Carstairs saw Mr. Playfair waiting in the north corridor. She says she noticed him several times during the interval and spoke to him. And Mrs. Wrayburn saw him there at one thirty or thereabouts. Then at one forty-five he and Miss Carstairs came and joined the company. Now, is there anyone who can check all these points?"

Within a very few minutes abundant confirmation was forthcoming. Mervyn Bunter, Lord Peter's personal man, said that he had been helping to take refreshments along to the buffet. Throughout the interval between the waltz and the fox trot, Mr. Lee had been standing by the service door beneath the musicians' stair, and halfway through the fox trot he had been seen to go out into the garden by way of the servants' hall.

The police sergeant had examined the tracks in the snow and found that Mr. Lee had not been joined by any other person, and that there was only the one set of his footprints, leaving the house by the servants' hall and returning by the garden door near the tapestry room.

Several persons were also found who had seen Mr. Bellingham in the interval between the waltz and the fox trot, and who were able to say that he had danced the fox trot through with Mrs. Bellingham. Joan Carstairs had also been seen continuously throughout the waltz and the fox trot, and during the following interval and the beginning of Sir Roger.

Moreover, the servants who had danced at the lower end of the room were positive that from 1:29 to 1:45 Mr. Playfair had sat continuously on the settee in the north corridor, except for the few seconds during which he had glanced into the ballroom. They were also certain that during that time no one had gone up the staircase at the lower end of the corridor, while Mr. Dodd was equally positive that, after 1:40, nobody except Mr. Lee had entered the garden passage or the tapestry room.

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Finally, the circle was closed by William Hoggarty, the gardener. He asserted with the most obvious sincerity that from 1:30 to 1:40 he had been stationed in the garden passage to receive the waits and marshal them to their places. During that time no one had come down the stair from the picture gallery or entered the tapestry room. From 1:40 onward he had sat beside Mr. Dodd in the passage and nobody had passed him except Mr. Lee.

These points being settled, there was no further reason to doubt Jim Playfair's evidence, since his partners were able to prove his whereabouts during the waltz, the fox trot, and the intervening interval. At 1:28, or just after, he had seen Charmian Grayle alive. At 2:02 she had been found dead in the tapestry room. And during that interval *no one had been seen to enter the room, and every person had been accounted for. . . .*

At six o'clock the exhausted guests had been allowed to go to their rooms, accommodations being provided in the house for those who, like the Bellinghams, had come from a distance, since the Superintendent had announced his intention of interrogating them all afresh later in the day.

This new inquiry produced no result. Lord Peter Wimsey did not take part in it. He and Bunter (who was an expert photographer) occupied themselves in photographing the ballroom and adjacent rooms and corridors from every imaginable point of view, for, as Lord Peter said, "You never know what may turn out to be relevant."

Late in the afternoon they retired together to the cellar, where with dishes, chemicals, et cetera hastily procured from the local chemist, they proceeded to develop the plates.

"That's the lot, my lord," observed Bunter at length, sloshing the final plate in the water and tipping it into the hypo. "You can switch the light on now, my lord."

Wimsey did so, blinking in the sudden white glare.

"A very hefty bit of work," said he. "Hullo! What's that plateful of blood you've got there?"

"That's the red backing they put on these plates, my lord, to obviate halation. You may have observed me washing it off before inserting the plate in the developing dish. Halation is a phenomenon—"

Wimsey was not attending.

"But why didn't I notice it before?" he demanded. "That stuff looked exactly like clear water."

"So it would, my lord, in the red safe-light. The appearance of whiteness is produced," added Bunter sententiously, "by the reflection of *all* the available light. When all the available light is red, then red and white are, naturally, indistinguishable. Similarly, in a green light—"

"Good God!" said Wimsey. "Wait a moment, Bunter, I must think this out . . . Here! damn those plates—

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let them be. I want you upstairs."

He led the way at a canter to the ballroom, dark now, with the windows in the south corridor already curtained and only the dimness of the December evening filtering through the high windows of the clerestory above the arcading. He first turned on the three great chandeliers in the ballroom itself. Owing to the heavy oak paneling that rose to the roof at both ends and all four angles of the room, these threw no light at all on the staircase at the lower end of the north corridor.

Next, he turned on the light in the four-sided hanging lantern, which hung in the north corridor above and between the two settees. A vivid shaft of green light immediately flooded the lower half of the corridor and the staircase; the upper half was bathed in strong amber, while the remaining sides of the lantern showed red toward the ballroom and blue toward the corridor wall.

Wimsey shook his head.

"Not much room for error there. Unless—I know! Run, Bunter, and ask Miss Carstairs and Mr. Playfair to come here a moment."

While Bunter was gone, Wimsey borrowed a stepladder from the kitchen and carefully examined the fitting of the lantern. It was a temporary affair, the lantern being supported by a hook screwed into a beam and lit by means of an electric cord run from the socket of a permanent fixture a little distance away.

"Now, you two," said Wimsey, when the two guests arrived, "I want to make a little experiment. Will you sit down on this settee, Playfair, as you did last night. And you, Miss Carstairs—I picked you out to help because you're wearing a white dress. Will you go up the stairs at the end of the corridor as Miss Grayle did last night. I want to know whether it looks the same to Playfair as it did then."

He watched them as they carried out this maneuver. Jim Playfair looked puzzled.

"It doesn't seem quite the same, somehow. I don't know what it is, but there *is* a difference."

Joan, returning, agreed with him.

"I was sitting on that other settee a part of the time," she said, "and it looks different to me. I think it's darker."

"Lighter," said Jim.

"Good!" said Wimsey. "That's what I wanted you to say. Now, Bunter, swing that lantern through a quarter-turn to the left."

The moment this was done, Joan gave a little cry.

"That's it! That's it! The blue light! I remember thinking how frosty-faced those poor waits looked."

"And you, Playfair?"

"That's right," said Jim, satisfied. "The light was red last night. *I* remember thinking how warm and cosy it looked."

Wimsey laughed.

"We're on to it, Bunter. What's the chessboard rule? *The Queen*

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stands on a square of her own color. Find the maid who looked after the dressing room, and ask her whether Mrs. Bellingham was there last night between the fox trot and Sir Roger."

In five minutes Bunter was back.

"The maid says, my lord, that Mrs. Bellingham did not come into the dressing room at that time. But she saw her come out of the picture gallery and run downstairs towards the tapestry room just as the band struck up Sir Roger."

"And that," said Wimsey, "was at one twenty-nine."

"Mrs. Bellingham?" said Jim. "But you said you saw her yourself in the ballroom before one thirty. She couldn't have had time to commit the murder."

"No, she couldn't," said Wimsey. "But Charmian Grayle was dead long before that. It was the Red Queen, not the White, you saw on the staircase. Find out why Mrs. Bellingham lied about her movements, and then we shall know the truth."

"A very sad affair, my lord," said Superintendent Johnson, some hours later. "Mr. Bellingham came across with it like a gentleman as soon as we told him we had evidence against his wife. It appears that Miss Grayle knew certain facts about him which would have been very damaging to his political career. She'd been getting money out of him for years. Earlier in the evening she surprised him by making fresh demands. During the last waltz they had together, they went into the tapestry room and a quarrel took place. He lost his temper and laid hands on her.

"He says he never meant to hurt her seriously, but she started to scream and he took hold of her throat to silence her and—sort of accidentally—throttled her. When he found what he'd done, he left her there and came away, feeling, as he says, all of a daze.

"He had the next dance with his wife. He told her what had happened, and then discovered that he'd left the little scepter affair he was carrying in the room with the body. Mrs. Bellingham—she's a brave woman—undertook to fetch it back. She slipped through the dark passage under the Musicians' Gallery—which was empty—and up the stair to the picture gallery. She did not hear Mr. Playfair speak to her. She ran through the gallery, down the other stair, got the scepter and hid it under her own dress.

"Later, she heard from Mr. Playfair about what he saw, and realized that in the red light he had mistaken her for the White Queen. In the early hours of this morning, she slipped downstairs and managed to get the lantern shifted round. Of course, she's an accessory after the fact, but she's the kind of a wife a man would like to have. I hope they let her off light."

"Amen!" said Lord Peter.

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It was a foolproof scheme. Nothing could possibly go wrong. Keller had planned it to the last detail, had practiced every move, had even gone through agony to make it letter-perfect . . . A short story with implications and meanings you won't easily forget . . .

EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED

by JIM THOMPSON

SEATED ON THE BED IN HIS SLEAZY hotel room, Neil Keller allowed himself another short drink from the whiskey bottle and again picked up the hammer. It was a tiny instrument, with a head little larger than the head of a match. Keller raised it to his mouth, pushed back his upper lip with a finger, and gave one of his front teeth a firm tap.

The tooth moved under the blow. Wincing, Keller gave it a few more taps, then shifted to another tooth. It moved also—they were both loosening up nicely. Keller worked on them slowly but steadily, stopping only for an occasional pain-killing drink.

Relatively speaking, there was not a great deal of pain—nothing at all compared with what it had been a month ago. It had been real hell then, back when he had begun the job of loosening two perfectly sound teeth—getting them to the point where they could be finally removed with only one more hour's steady effort.

Now, however, the agony was over, and he had nothing more unpleasant to look forward to than killing Jake Goss. One-Eyed Jake with the missing teeth, the mushy voice, the mole on his right cheek—a guy with a face you could never forget.

Jake had been pretty nice to Keller. Jake had kind of taken a fancy to him when Keller first holed up in this fleabag, and it was through Jake's recommendation that he'd got his job as night janitor in the Wexler Building—Jake was the night watchman.

He was stupid and boastful, this Jake Goss—a guy that had to spread around everything he knew. Still, he'd been pretty nice, so Keller sort of hated to kill him. And yet he couldn't help grinning a little when he thought about it.

It was so damned funny, you see. Really a riot. Keller was going to kill Jake, but it was Jake who would be tagged for murder! The murder of Neil Keller. He, Keller, would kill Jake and knock over Old Man Wexler for a hundred grand or better. But the cops—ha, ha—the cops would be looking for Jake.

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Chuckling, Keller turned sideways on the bed and glanced down at the morning newspaper. It was open at the realty columns, where a story in small type announced the transfer by Otto J. Wexler of a certain piece of real estate—"assessed valuation $50,000."

Being assessed at $50,000, it would have sold for at least twice that much. Jake Goss had loftily explained this obvious fact to him one morning, while pointing out a similar item in the newspaper.

"See that the old man sold a house yesterday for ten thousand," he had said. "That means he's got maybe twenty grand in his safe tonight."

"Here you mean?" Keller had said, incredulously. "You mean he keeps that kind of dough up in his office—his apartment?"

"Yep. Getting his money out of real estate as fast as he can, and the kind of deals he's putting it into—not really illegal, y'know, but just a little shady—stuff that the banks won't touch, and with the kind of interest they can't charge."

Wexler was in the loan-shark business in a big way, Jake explained, and he was expanding rapidly. "I know, see?" he went on, his one eye gleaming pridefully. "Me and Wexler are like that. Why, there ain't a morning passes that I don't drop in on him for a cuppa coffee. He wouldn't feel right if I didn't. The old guy don't trust most people, so I guess he gets pretty lonesome. But—"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Keller had cut in impatiently. "You have coffee with him, and he trusts you. But he wouldn't be sucker enough to keep any big dough *here*. He's kidding you about that."

"The hell he is! You mean, he'd be afraid of getting robbed? How's anyone going to rob him?"

Keller had hesitated. How? Well, now that he stopped to think about it, a robbery didn't look so simple. The old man's office-apartment was thoroughly burglar-alarmed. The building's doors were locked at night, and no one could get in or out unless Jake let them. Of course, one of the tenants could stick a gun in Jake's ribs, or—

Keller mentioned this possibility to the one-eyed man. Jake shook his head.

"So suppose some holdup artist did get in here. Suppose he got past them burglar alarms, and made the old man come across. What good would it do him? This building is right down in the middle of town. There's cops going by all night long. A guy wouldn't get ten feet from the door before they put the cuffs on him."

"Yeah," Keller nodded thoughtfully. "I guess that's right, isn't it?"

"Now, you or me," Jake said. "Suppose you or me tried to rob Wexler. He'd open his door for us, sure, so that would take care of one hurdle. And we wouldn't have any trouble getting out of the building or any trouble with the cops. But

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how far would we get? The robbery would be discovered in a few hours. They'd know that we did it, just because we've gone, and they'd have our descriptions down pat. Which is just the same as saying they'd have us cold. Oh, maybe we could take it on the lam for a little while, but sooner or later—"

"I guess you're right," Keller had nodded. "It just couldn't be done, Jake."

And he had laughed silently, contemptuously, as he spoke . . .

The two front teeth were out now. Keller stood in front of the lavatory mirror, snapping a black patch over one eye, applying an artgum mole to one cheek, stippling freckles across his nose, and thickening his brows with color pencils.

He put on his brown uniform cap. He slumped his shoulders, the way Jake slumped his. Then—well, nothing then. That was all there was to it. Except for the extraction of the teeth, the entire transformation had taken only a few minutes, yet it had made him into another man.

Naturally, he couldn't keep up the masquerade indefinitely. Given enough time, someone was bound to see through it. But no one would be given that much time. Not Wexler, after he'd been slugged and tied up. Not the cops, as Keller left the building.

Thus, they would swear that he was Jake, that it was Jake who had pulled the robbery and brazenly walked away with the loot.

They would have no suspicions —nor the opportunity to prove them—that he might not be Jake.

Keller studied his reflection in the mirror, mouthing silent words, grimacing experimentally. Those teeth—he would get the gaps filled later on. Meanwhile, as long as he was careful about smiling and talking, no one would even know that two teeth were missing.

He removed the eyepatch and mole, then scrubbed his face thoroughly. Wrapping the patch and color pencils in a handkerchief, he stuffed them into his pocket and left the hotel.

At the railroad station he retrieved a large brief case from a rental locker. Proceeding to the Men's Room, he gave the attendant fifty cents and was admitted to a dressing cubicle. Some twenty minutes later he emerged, smartly attired, his work clothes stuffed into the brief case, and taxied to a nearby hotel.

He had registered there several times before to establish his identity—or, rather, his false identity. So the doorman and bellboy greeted him as Mr. Jennings, and the clerk assured him that they were delighted to have Mr. Jennings back as a guest again.

"Going to have you with us a while, sir?" he inquired, as he assigned a room to Keller. "Or is this another one of your flying trips?"

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"Looks like a real quickie this time," Keller said briskly. "I have to close a deal tonight and head back to Chicago in the morning. Just hope I can squeeze in a few hours of sleep."

"Well, I hope so too." The clerk frowned, with professional warmth. "You drive yourself too hard, Mr. Jennings."

Arriving at his room, Keller dismissed the bellboy with a generous tip and received generous thanks in return. Then, as the youth departed beaming, Keller's own smile faded and he was filled with an uneasy sense of depression. It was a familiar feeling—one he experienced every time he came to this hotel.

Probably, he supposed, it derived from the way he was made welcome here, from the establishment's friendliness toward him. Its bought-and-paid-for, good-business kind of friendliness. For at such times it was borne home to him that he had never been exactly laved in the warmth of real friendship. Axiomatically, it was impossible.

Genuine friendship was a sharing arrangement. You knew a man's problems, his secret hopes and aspirations, and he knew yours. And you sympathized with, and wished the best for, one another.

That was real friendship—always a matter of give-and-take. So if you were strictly a taker, as Keller was, it obviously wasn't for him. He couldn't let a man know too much about him. Not only that, but he couldn't let himself know very much about the other man. If he did, you see, he might weaken. He might get to feel sorry for the man to the extent of letting him slip away.

Take Jake Goss, now—one-eyed, gap-toothed Jake. What was his background? Did he have a wife somewhere, or a sweetheart? How had he lost his eye, and those teeth? Was his dullness, his absorption with gossip, only a protective reaction to lifelong failure? Was it his way of shedding the blame for his lack of achievement?

Jake was still a young man—little older, at least, than Keller. Yet he seemed quite content to go on forever in a cheap, monotonous, dead-end job.

Why? How could he have so little ambition? What had imprinted him so indelibly with the stamp of stupidity? What made the guy tick?

Sprawled on the bed, Keller let his eyes drift shut, dismissing the many questions.

He didn't know any of the answers—he didn't want to know them. For the sake of his future comfort, and his present plans, it was better to leave Jake as he was—a human question mark. A human zero who was soon to be erased.

Keller slept a few hours. Then, carrying his brief case, he hurried out of the hotel and returned to the railroad station.

In the Men's Room he changed back into his work uniform. His

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business suit went into the brief case, which he again placed in a locker. The suit would be rumpled, of course, but that was all right. When he went back to the hotel in the morning, he would look about as he should—as a man probably would look who has been up all night at an important conference.

Keller ate supper, then went to the Wexler Building. Mindful of his missing teeth, he greeted Jake cautiously, just a little nervously. But the one-eyed man obviously didn't notice. He was grumpy, in a bad mood about something or other. He didn't want to talk or be talked to, and he made the fact apparent.

That suited Keller perfectly, of course. Loading his pails and mops onto one of the elevators, he ascended to the top floor of the building and began his nightly work.

The hours passed slowly. At three in the morning he took over Jake's duties while Jake went out to eat. And at 3:30, on Jake's return, he himself went out for a half an hour.

When he came back to the building Jake admitted him surlily, still grumpily silent. And Keller lowered his elevator to the basement.

The trip was routine at this hour of the morning. The incinerator, burdened with the night's accumulation of waste, was frequently in need of adjusting. So Keller adjusted it, opening its dampers to their widest. He listened to the responding roar of the flames, and nodded with grim satisfaction.

That would take care of Jake—that and a few heavy blows from a steel poker. Between the two things, the poker and the fire, Jake would lose his one-eyed, missing-toothed identity. In effect, Jake would become Neil Keller.

Keller took out his wallet and stripped it of money. Then, with its identification cards intact, he tossed it into a dark corner and returned to the elevator.

Old Man Wexler was an early riser. He was always up by six or before. At 6:30—never earlier—Jake Goss stopped by to share a cup of coffee with him. So at five minutes before six . . .

Keller parked the elevator on the second floor and took the make-up and eyepatch from his pocket. Working with practiced skill, he assumed the appearance of Jake Goss. He used extra care this morning, and the transformation was not merely good but was near-perfect—indeed, so perfect that even he was startled.

He stared at himself in the elevator mirror, fascinated by Jake's face, even a little frightened by it, actually believing—as the cops and Wexler were certain to—that he *was* Jake Goss.

It was 6:15 when he left the elevator and took to the stairs. At 6:20, having ascended two flights, he stood before the door of Wexler's

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apartment-office, sniffing the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, making one last swift check-through of his plans.

Let's see, he thought; *I give the old man a couple of medium-good pokes, just enough to make him behave without knocking him out. Then, as soon as he opens the safe, I bind and gag him, put him in the bedroom, and come back by the door to wait for Jake. And when Jake shows up at 6:30—*

But there was no use in going through that again. Besides, there wasn't time. Keller raised his hand and knocked.

The door opened abruptly.

Keller said, "Okay, Wexler! This is a—"

And that was all he said.

For suddenly his vocal cords, his face, his entire body seemed paralyzed. And he could only stand there helplessly, and stare.

Not at Wexler, but at Keller. Yes, at Keller!

He, Neil Keller, was staring at Neil Keller

Then something crashed down on his skull, and when he recovered consciousness he was in the basement. And the other Keller was standing over him, a heavy steel poker in his hands.

He didn't live very long after that —not long enough to solve the simple riddle of the other Keller. And, certainly, it was a simple enough riddle.

After all, if facial blemishes can be put *on* with make-up, they can be *concealed* with make-up—right? And if teeth can be *removed,* they can also be put *in*—correct? And a glass eye is rather easily purchased —right?

Or, getting down to cases, if you can easily assume the appearance of another man, why can't he just as easily assume yours?

Well, you see how it was. But Neil Keller didn't. He didn't have the time.

In his last brief moments all he saw was himself. The one man he had not guarded against. The one man every man faces sooner or later. All he saw was that he was about to be murdered by himself—which, in a sense, was exactly what happened.

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Herbert Russell Wakefield's work is not as well-known in America as it should be. Occasionally one of his supernatural stories appears in an anthology, but his serious studies in criminology and his mystery novels are known chiefly to connoisseurs.

It has been written that H. R. Wakefield, though not a religious man, "belongs to that growing number of intelligent people who have come to believe that there are many phenomena loosely called 'psychic' which do occur, however unable mankind is to explain them rationally." On that premise, it is easy to understand Mr. Wakefield's belief in a "psychic" detective. . . .

THE VOICE IN THE INNER EAR

by H. R. WAKEFIELD

GORAN FIRST SET EYES ON LEfanu when he was washing his hands at the Palmerston Club, to which he had been recently elected. Lefanu was using the next basin and they looked across at each other. For a moment Goran held his breath, and the soap slid from his hands. Then he recovered himself, and the soap.

The cause of his lapse was partly the odd look the other man gave him, partly the sense of mental disturbance this look produced in him. The expression on Lefanu's face might have been considered impertinent or familiar, if he had not so obviously been a person incapable of such vulgarity. It might have been described as a friendly, quizzical, understanding look.

Goran was so affected by the encounter that he forgot all about his lunch and went out and walked the streets for a full two hours, spiritually ill at ease and much moved in his mind, seeing always before his inner vision that lean, oval, slightly sallow face with its searching brown eyes. Goran had the very queer sensation that they had long been acquainted, as if they had met in some previous incarnation. An absurd idea, but how otherwise to explain this feeling for one with whom he had never exchanged a word, never seen before to his knowledge?

He took to frequenting the Club regularly. For a time he never came into close contact with Lefanu, but he often caught sight of him across the hall or in one of the rooms and, if their eyes met, Lefanu's face took on very much that same expression —always.

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Goran was acquainted with several of the members, and one of them told him some facts about Lefanu. He was reputed to be a man of considerable wealth who traveled extensively, particularly in the Far East, and was a connoisseur of Oriental art; his collection of jade and priest robes was considered one of the finest in Europe. Though he "knew everybody" he was temperamentally rather a recluse. All rather vague and exotically commonplace, thought Goran.

But one day Goran discovered another side to Lefanu's character, for he overheard him talking with a circle of distinguished persons in the smoking room; a well-known novelist, a couple of K.C.'s, and others. Lefanu appeared to be the center of this circle, for he was doing most of the talking and the rest were listening with close attention.

He was discussing a recent inquest on an elderly female in whose body traces of poison had been found. Several of her relatives, who were in a position to insure it, had had an interest in her death. But though there was suspicion enough, the truth was dark and uncertain, and the verdict had been "Open."

Lefanu, with extreme virtuosity —almost, thought Goran, amounting to inspiration or second sight —was analyzing the case. He advanced two clues of which, he maintained, the police had entirely missed the significance; he showed precisely how, in his opinion, the crime had been committed, the trail obscured, and how it should have led straight to the culprits.

"As if," thought Goran, "he had actually been there, standing unseen beside those two as they laid those so careful plans, foreseeing so much better than the ordinary murderer, perfectly prepared for and against suspicion, perfectly safe against proof, isolated from the world by their dreadful secret."

Goran recognized the analysis to be the work of an imaginative intelligence of a high order. This was also, apparently, the opinion of one of the K.C.'s, for he said, "That is complete and unanswerable; you'd have made a fortune at the Bar, my dear Lawrence, if you had been born without one."

"It's just a knack," replied Lefanu, laughing.

"Oh, it's a good deal more than that," said the K.C. "Your critiques always leave me with a very odd suggestion of inside knowledge which I don't in the least understand; they have a flabbergasting air of authenticity. Nevertheless, I have certain objections I should like to raise. Let us discuss the case at the next meeting of the Q.T."

This conversation still further increased Goran's interest in Lefanu, for he was also much fascinated by criminological problems, particularly those of homicide. Making further inquiries, he found that the "Q.T." was a very select little club,

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the members of which dined together at irregular intervals and discussed cases of unsolved crime.

This discovery made Goran all the more anxious to make Lefanu's acquaintance. In fact, by now "anxious" was hardly the word; "compelled" more accurately described his emotion; and this compulsion became so urgent that it eventually so overcame his natural reserve that he went up to Lefanu one afternoon when he found him reading in the library. As he approached, Lefanu looked up at him with that expression he knew so well.

Goran began to speak hurriedly and nervously. "My name is Goran," he said.

"I know that," replied Lefanu, smiling.

"I hope you'll pardon me," continued Goran, "but I happened to overhear your analysis of the Barth case the other day. It seemed to me to be brilliant. I, myself, am in a very small way a student of such matters, and I was once concerned in what I believe to be—well, something that might interest you, something about which I should greatly value your views. If I didn't think that you would find it worthy of the exercise of your exceptional ability, I should not have intruded myself upon you." He mopped his forehead.

"Of course, I'm very glad you have," said Lefanu courteously. "I should be delighted to hear about it."

"Then, " said Goran, "I wonder if you would dine with me one night and allow me to put the facts before you. I should suggest tonight if I thought there was a chance of your being disengaged. My wife—who has had trouble with her nerves—is in the south of France, but I think I can promise you a decent dinner."

"Tonight will suit me perfectly," replied Lefanu.

"Well, then, could you be at forty-six Rexham Gardens about eight o'clock?"

"Forty-six. I shall be there."

Goran shivered slightly as he left the Club, and, searching for an explanation, found he had been sweating profusely. He hurried home and drank two stiff whiskies in four gulps. His nerves then ceased temporarily to trouble him —or almost so.

It was not until near the end of dinner that the conversation came round to the subject of crime. Lefanu rather deliberately kept it to other topics and Goran got the uneasy impression he was being studied. When the subject was eventually broached, Lefanu suggested he had no great respect for the sanctity of human life.

"It is a superficial concept," he said, "which ceases to operate very easily. On the battlefield, for example. If there were a fundamental moral veto on killing, it would not lose its force when translated from Soho to Flanders. Again, to kill an-

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other painlessly is often to do him a great service."

"Is it entirely a question of motive?" suggested Goran.

"Again, let us take the case," said Lefanu, "of two men and one woman, she married to one of the men but loving the other, and being loved by him in return. Let us suppose for some reason—religion, perhaps—divorce is impossible. The only possible way by which the lovers can become united is by the removal of the husband. Well, logically, the happiness of two being twice as important as the happiness of one, the destruction of the husband is logically justified."

Goran stared fixedly at him. "You really believe that?" he asked.

Lefanu smiled. "I merely said that *logically* there was no flaw in the argument. I can't tell you how I should react to an actual case that was put before me. But what is the justification always given for the wholesale murder of war? That it is for the greatest good of the greatest number that one nation should murder as many as possible of its enemies. That equally applies to the hypothetical case I put forward just now. In each case the individual murderer feels he is helping to insure the widest distribution of felicity. In war, of course, the individual murderer feels he has the approval of the herd behind him when he sticks his bayonet into the belly of his foe; he knows he has the sentiment of the herd against him when he sticks a dagger into the belly of his rival.

"Morally, there is not the slightest distinction between the two cases—only the grossest special pleading can establish one. But I am no more logical than any other man. I am emotional, cowardly, conventional. I might disapprove of the wielder of the dagger. It would entirely depend on the circumstances of the case."

Goran regarded him searchingly while he was uttering these specious and perverse observations. He believed he had a definite purpose in making them.

"Let us go to my study," he said, "and I will tell you about that case to which I referred."

"As I have said," he continued when they were seated before the fire, "I overheard your dissection of the Barth case. It seemed to me a most brilliant performance. Not merely the analysis itself, but as Godwin observed, the suggestion of inside information it left on one's mind."

"In a sense that is what I have got," replied the other, "though I seldom refer to the fact. I am at times clairvoyant—a convenient word for describing a not-quite-understood mode of apprehension. For example, when I first saw you, I felt absolutely convinced we should become better acquainted."

It was on the tip of Goran's tongue to say that was just how he

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had felt himself, but for some reason he decided against it.

"Then again," Lefanu went on, "I often have the truth about such cases as the Barth vividly revealed to me. I have a sense of absolute certainty. It was after spending six months in a Tibetan monastery that this faculty became entirely reliable. So-called 'Eastern Mysticism' is often sheer bunk, but by no means always so. I learned some odd things in Tibet—the air breathes magically there. But let me hear about this puzzle with which you were concerned."

Goran lit a cigar, and after that it seemed as if he found it a little difficult to frame his opening sentences. Presently, however, he began. "Some years ago I went down to stay at the house of a man I had known slightly for a very long time. I will not mention names or places. He was a man of great wealth married to a woman thirty years younger than himself. There were several other people staying in the house. There was his nephew, who would inherit a good deal of his money."

"Did he know he would?"

"Yes. Then there was his brother-in-law, who more or less openly resented his sister's treatment by her husband. And there was a man who, I happen to know, owed his host a very large sum. We four made up the shooting party. Our host had always been the picture of rude health, very strong, tireless, vital. On this occasion, however, he told me that he had recently suffered several very severe attacks of indigestion which had included some alarming symptoms. On each occasion he had been struck down with agonizing pains. As a result, the doctor told him his heart was slightly affected."

"How did the doctor diagnose the case?"

Goran paused before replying, but presently said, "He gave it some long technical name and said it was a case of severe functional disturbance."

"Did he get another opinion?"

"I believe not. He put my friend on a strict diet and, I gather, took other measures he considered suitable. But although the acute symptoms passed away, my friend remained debilitated, nervous, and apprehensive about himself. He seemed, however, reasonably well till one night during the second week of our stay. He went to bed apparently quite well, but began to ring his bell violently at two in the morning. He was found in the throes of a violent attack and died before the doctor arrived."

"I suppose there was an inquest?" said Lefanu.

"No. The doctor gave a certificate that death was due to heart failure."

"And is that all?" asked Lefanu.

"Yes."

"You suspected something?"

"I want to know what you think about it—to test that faculty of

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yours," replied Goran, twisting in his chair.

"Well, you've certainly given it little enough to work on," laughed Lefanu. "Apparently there were three persons in the house, each with some degree of motive for killing your friend."

"I suppose so."

"Well, let's hear more about them. The young heir, for example."

"Completely commonplace, selfish, improvident."

"A potential murderer?"

Goran seemed uneasy with this question. "Is there such a person?" he said.

"Well, do you think he had the guts and initiative to plan and execute his uncle's murder?"

"No," replied Goran.

"What about the brother-in-law?"

"A sponger; otherwise he wouldn't have been there." Goran said with emphasis.

"Would you judge he had sufficient temperament to kill a man for ill-treating his sister? I take it from what you said he *did* ill-treat her?"

"Not physically, of course. But I consider he submitted her to extreme mental torture. She was absolutely dependent on him, and he brutally took advantage of the fact."

"I rather wonder he was a friend of yours," said Lefanu, smiling.

This remark seemed rather to touch Goran on the raw. "He was really only an acquaintance," he said. "When I accepted this invitation I didn't realize the state of affairs, that he possessed this strong sadistic taint."

"And the man who owed him money?"

"A rather curious type, but just a type. Plausible, good company, good shot, with bad business ideas —bad because they were too big for him. It's no use your asking if he was a potential murderer, because I don't know one when I see one."

"And the wife?" asked Lefanu.

Again Goran hesitated, for this question also seemed rather difficult to answer. "A very beautiful, charming, and intelligent woman," he remarked after some moments.

Lefanu lit another cigarette. "You've certainly given me a teaser. However, we'll see."

He leaned back in his chair and put his hands over his eyes. He remained absolutely motionless for what seemed to Goran a very long time. Suddenly he sat up and said, "Tell me about the doctor."

"The doctor?" replied Goran. "Oh, just an ordinary G.P."

"Surely not quite ordinary, I hope. Here is a patient clearly suffering from what he must have realized was a dangerous disease, almost certainly one with which he was inadequately equipped to deal. Yet he doesn't call in a specialist, but complacently accepts his patient's peril; and when that patient dies, he merely remarks that he expected him to do so. Furthermore, in what seems an obscure and dubi-

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ous case, he gives a death certificate without a qualm. How old was he?"

"About forty-five."

"Was he a friend of the family?"

"I believe so."

"An old friend of your host's wife?"

"What do you imply by that?" asked Goran.

"Well, I have found a possible justification for your suspicions," replied Lefanu. "It seems to me incredible that either of your fellow guests could have poisoned this man. For this reason. Your ordinary G.P. would have had to have been an extraordinary negligent or half-witted G.P. not to have spotted the fact that his patient was being poisoned. I studied medicine when I was younger, and I can assure you that this doctor could not have failed to share your suspicion, and far more strongly."

"There have been cases where the doctor was deceived," said Goran rather perfunctorily.

"I grant you that, but only where the doctor was extraordinarily negligent. Did this man seem to be?"

"No."

"Then I say emphatically that his conduct was so unprofessional that it requires more explanation than I can find for it, save on one assumption—that he killed, or arranged for the killing of, your friend. Let us indulge in a little harmless theorizing. The doctor is thrown into the company of a beautiful, charming, and unhappily married woman. Was *he* married, by the way?"

"No."

"Well, then. Susceptible, probably meeting few other attractive women, your G.P. becomes madly infatuated with her. She reciprocates, for unhappily married women are by that very fact ready to fall in love. Divorce is out of the question; and he cannot afford to ruin his career and beggar himself by running away with the lady. He gets to loathe the husband for his brutality to the woman he loves. Remember, there are certain temperaments, always persons of fine character, in whom cruelty towards helpless human beings or animals rouses uncontrollable fury; they go berserk. If this doctor was such a one, and the cruelty was to one he adored, the result would be almost inevitable.

"Well, the emotional situation grows more and more strained. The strain becomes intolerable. Suddenly he—or, I think, more probably she,—sees there is a way out, a perfectly safe way out, for he was his own dispenser, no doubt. Presently our friend has an attack of 'indigestion'; how easy for the wife to arrange that—under expert direction. From then on he is in the doctor's power. He prescribes for him, patches him up, and inspires his confidence. Well, we needn't prolong his agony. Before long the doctor is sending a wreath with his

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name on it and provisionally fixing the happy day."

After Lefanu ceased speaking, Goran stared into the fire for a while.

"I agree," he said after a time, "that is a plausible theory—"

"No," said Lefanu, "it is fact."

Goran stared at him. "Your faculty assures you of it?"

"It gave me the vital hint. The rest was mere deduction from it."

"What hint?"

Lefanu paused before replying. "Somehow," he said, "I do not feel it was just to test this faculty that you told me that story. Was it, perhaps, that you wanted—it is rather hard to put it—that you wanted someone with whom to share your secret suspicion, to ease your mind and get it off your chest?"

"Yes," replied Goran, grinding his cigar into an ashtray. "It has troubled me greatly. That is why I felt I must confide in someone, confide in you."

"Then I'll tell you. After you had finished describing the circumstances, I emptied my mind, allowed it to become a complete blank, thus permitting it to become receptive to this odd form of telepathy. And after a while I suddenly heard a voice speaking in my inner ear, as it were."

"What did it say?" asked Goran, gazing at the ashtray.

"It said—very stealthily, *Change the bottles while we're still in the dining room.*" He glanced at his wrist watch. "Well, I must be getting home. Many thanks for a most interesting evening."

Goran led him downstairs to the hall and helped him on with his coat.

"Tell me," he said urgently, "how that hint helped you?"

"I have suggested," replied Lefanu, "that your doctor was probably a man of fine fibre. Such a man would experience terrible and lasting remorse. But I shouldn't worry any more about it if I were you. My favorite text is, 'Judge not that ye be not judged,' and I'm not at all sure what I'd have done if I'd been in the G.P.'s shoes." He opened the front door.

"Tell me," said Goran, clutching his coat, "how did that hint help you? Tell me!"

Lefanu glanced away across the street. "I recognized your voice," he replied gently. "Good night, Goran." And hailing a passing taxi, he drove away.

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Another "thriller" from that master thriller-writer, L. J. Beeston—complete with the passion and suspense of an earlier era, an exclamatory excitement rarely found these understated days and therefore all the more welcome as a change of reading pace . . .

MELODRAMATIC INTERLUDE

by L. J. BEESTON

STANDING ERECT IN HIS BLUE AND silver tunic, the conductor of the orchestra, with a studied and graceful movement of his baton, had just led his men into the opening bars of the *Swan Song of Farjeon,* when a handsome man in evening dress, broad-shouldered and upright as a soldier, crossed the wide floor of the crowded dining room of a hotel on the south side of the Strand.

As he approached a table in a recess, which was partly hidden by a lofty-growing palm, a lady who was sitting there with a male companion exclaimed in an astonished tone, "Ah, *mon Dieu,* can it be? Yes, here comes Paul Lionzac!"

In a moment her hand was stretched out in glad welcome. She was almost tiny, with vivacious black eyes; and her robe of green silk, which seemed fashioned of gossamer web, clung to her body with intimate caresses.

"Why, a full age has passed since we met!" she cried. "How many years—"

"Not one, if time be counted by your eyes, by your most enchanting freshness," interrupted the other, with a slow and lingering smile. *"Mademoiselle—"*

"Ah, no longer *mademoiselle!* I am married, my dear friend, This is my husband, Count Basil."

Her companion rose to the introduction. He did not move with the best grace. He was a man below middle height and slenderly built, and his thick dark beard gave a pallor to his features.

As the two men exchanged bows, Count Basil shot a glance at the other, as swift as lightning and darkly uneasy.

"Now you are going to sit down and talk to us. Tell us what you have been doing in your long silence," entreated the lady. "Emile, urge him!"

"I am sure he cannot resist you, Philistrina," answered her husband, whose paleness was increasing.

"Not for one moment," agreed the newcomer. "A small secret: I knew that you and Count Basil were dining here tonight, and I came to see you; but I warn you that I shall speak softly, for the orchestra is very fine, and one ought to

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respect it. This *Swan Song,* now—it approaches, in some minor chords, the heartbreak in Chopin's *Marche Funèbre.* Listen. That is the whisper of a night wind through melancholy cypress trees. One sees a cortège, a grave."

As he spoke, lowering himself into a chair which a waiter had brought, he lifted his eyes and rested them steadily on Count Basil's face, which seemed to have become almost bloodless.

"I begin to fear, my poor friend, that since we met, you have handled more thorns than roses," said Philistrina, with a wistful glance.

"For thirteen years I have worked in the prison mines of my country," answered Lionzac calmly.

"Ah—no, no, do not tell me that!" gasped Philistrina.

"They exiled me for twenty, but I was released after thirteen," the speaker went on in a deep, unimpassioned voice, as if the fount of emotion had long since become exhausted in him. "So now you know about the years of my silence—or, rather, you know absolutely nothing about them, no more than the untroubled angels know of those who gnash their teeth in the pit, in the abyss, where I have been."

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!" said the Countess Basil in a whisper, the tears in her black eyes brimming to the lids. "Oh, what a frightful thing to happen to you! How sorry I am! Emile, is it not truly dreadful?"

"Indeed, yes," answered Count Basil, speaking in such a low tone that it was scarcely audible.

"It was for a political offense, of course," continued Lionzac. "It was fourteen years ago. You were not married then, Countess. Fifteen of us were sent off in a batch on the long march to the mines, in the heart of a terrible winter. For weeks and months we marched, on a chain, in our earth-colored frieze coats. The roads were iron. The sun hardly ever shone in the sky.

"We saw nothing but the mounted guard, with ready carbine, and the endless line of telegraph poles which climbed up the hills and down them, and stretched across plains covered with snow and frozen marshes, over which the wind screamed, whining in the overhead wires, and roaring through the dreary forests of spruce.

"One night, when the snow was falling so thickly that one might almost imagine a whisper of sound from those millions of drifting crystals, five of the fifteen prisoners broke from the chain and escaped."

Lionzac paused, as if checked by the ceasing of the music, which had ended in one long-drawn plaintive cry from the cello. Showing a singular lack of appreciation of his auditors' rapt attention, he took up the program of music and slowly ran a finger down the numbers.

"The next is Number Seven—*Papillons d' Amour.* Let that pass," he murmured.

The cryptic sentence was still on

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his lips when for the second time he rested his eyes on those of Count Basil. They seemed to hold little or no expression, but the other leaned back in his chair as if pushed by some unseen hand.

Philistrina broke the silence. "Yes, some of the prisoners escaped?" she urged.

"Five of us. We were all young. There was a student of medicine, a civil service clerk, a poet, and an officer who had been expelled from the French army. Lastly, there was myself. We showed no ingenuity in our method of escape. They had crowded us into the remnants of a deserted charcoal burner's hut. It was intolerable in there, but outside, with a freezing gale snapping the trees, it was worse.

"There was no fear that we should leave our shelter, so they went off to a village, leaving a single guard. We overpowered this man, menaced him with his own carbine, and made him break our chain. Five of us ran out; the others shrank from the prospect of almost certain death in that frozen wilderness.

"We ran hand in hand, for to lose contact would have meant separation. By keeping the wind behind us we avoided running in a circle. We fell into holes and into deep drifts; we stumbled over hidden roots. Whenever contact was broken, we did not move a yard until it was re-established.

"The French officer was one of those slender, steel-wire fellows whom nothing can dishearten or weary. He had a cry—a laugh—*'Eh bien, mes enfants,* are the girls all dead yet?' That boy, who was charming, was at one end of the chain of hope, in the sun; at the other end was the government clerk, who mingled curses with his gasps for breath.

"We had not gone very far when I felt sure that the poet, whose left hand was in my right, could not endure for very long the forced pace of our progress. There was fever in his burning palm, and the breath in his lungs made terrible music, like the jarring discord of broken wires or frayed strings.

"We survived that night, however. We survived seven more days. I want to tell you what happened at the end of the seventh day. You may be surprised, but I really came here to tell you—and Count Basil—what occurred on that seventh evening following our escape."

The narrator paused to lift to his lips a glass of red wine which he had ordered. He drank slowly, and all the time he looked at Count Basil over the rim of the crystal.

"I remember that the five of us were huddled in a copse," he went on steadily. "We had lighted a fire, and the resinous wood crackled with a great heat. About us the spruce trees crowded round like giants—those somber firs of the north whose needle-covered branches hang like mourning dra-

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pery, and which seem to court the bitterest winds and frosts. In spite of the fire, most of us were cold, with the chill of weariness and hunger; but we did not mind that, because on the coming day we hoped to cross the frontier and end the worst of our sufferings.

"It was high time, so far as the poet was concerned. He was in a bad way. Wrapped in two of our coats, he lay on the ground and rocked to and fro, as his mother had rocked him when he was a child, and babbled, in a touch of delirium, as he might have done then. Now and again he would stop and gaze at one of us intently. Then a beautiful smile would light up his wasted face, as if he was inexpressibly charmed.

"Suddenly the French officer, who had been unaccountably silent for several hours, burst out, 'They are trying to play a dirty trick on us, my friends! When I went into that village this afternoon and brought away those delicious crusts of black bread and that heavenly bottle of God-knows-what, I saw a proclamation nailed against a wall in the telegraph office. It seems that we are very badly wanted indeed. What do you think? Not only is a free pardon offered to any one of us who sells the rest, but to it is added a government promise of two thousand florins.

" 'That appears to me a foul trick, *mes camarades.* It is not what the English call football—or is it cricket? Consider! Pardon—liberty for betrayal, to say nothing of the two thousand. Well, I have been thinking about this matter, and I have an idea. We will, if you please—'

"At that instant the officer was interrupted by the poet, who sat up and cried in a perfectly natural voice, 'See between the trees! Ah, Christ, my lover!'

"We all looked where he pointed, and we saw an enormous globe, ruddy as fire, hanging over the horizon. To this he held out his arms, while he continued, as if enraptured:

" 'Suddenly rose from the south a light, as in autumn the blood-red
Moon climbs the crystal walls of heaven, and o'er the horizon
Titan-like stretches its hundred hands upon mountain and meadow,
Seizing the rocks and the rivers, and piling huge shadows upon them.'

" 'That is all right, *mon petit,*' soothed the officer. He turned to us again. 'Yes,' he said dramatically, 'I have an idea. Although we do not seem to be very far from liberty, *mes amis,* yet there is many a slip 'twixt cup and lip, and the nearer we approach the frontier, the greater the scrutiny. Is it possible, is it likely, that one of us, unwilling to let go such a chance, should be tempted to betray the rest?

" 'I might say that such perfidy is only to be found in nightmares; but

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who knows the human heart, and what frightful things lie at the bottom of that profound well? Therefore we will all join hands, and we will make a solemn pact and covenant. Come, *mes camarades!*'

"Startled by what he had told us, we took his proposition seriously, and our fingers met. The French officer looked up to the stars, which were clouded by the smoke of our fire, and exclaimed eloquently, 'Generally and individually we bind our souls, which have already borne so much, to bear up to the goal to which our faces are set.'

"He stopped and waited for us to repeat the words after him, which we did. Then he continued, his voice dropping to a lower note, 'And to this end we each pledge our word that if one of our company sell his comrades, that one shall pay for his treachery with his life.'

"These words, also, we echoed.

" 'Who comes out first from exile finds that traitor—if traitor there be.'

"We repeated.

" 'He shall seek him if he has to travel every zone in the habitable or uninhabitable globe,' continued the officer, who certainly fancied himself in this burst of eloquence and made the most of it. 'He shall seek him until he finds him, and he shall surely kill him! This is our pledged word, our sworn oath.'

"We solemnly spoke every syllable.

" '*Voilà!*' he cried, coming down to earth again. 'Then that is settled. Courage, everyone! What, are the nice girls all dead yet?'

"And I remember how he was answered by some lone wolf, in that land of death, who sent a long howl drifting down the polar wind."

The narrator leaned forward with folded arms resting on the table's edge.

"I am afraid this story bores you, Count," said he. "It is too long."

Count Basil turned his face, over which a convulsive twitch had passed once or twice, toward his wife.

"Are you tired of listening, my dear?" he questioned.

"I? No, indeed!" Philistrina looked at her husband in surprise. "Did you ever hear a story like this, Emile? I do not recollect ever being so enthralled in my life."

"I am gratified to interest you," said Lionzac.

"Ah, continue," urged the Countess impetuously. "But I know what you are going to say—one of you did betray the rest!"

"Indeed he did, *madame.*"

"Oh, monstrous, frightful, dastardly!" exclaimed Philistrina, clenching her tiny hands, and with a glimmer of passion sparkling in her black eyes. "Which was the traitor?"

"It was the former government employee."

"The detestable villain!" burst out Philistrina in a voice that quivered with anger, with fury. "Oh,

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my poor friend! How did he do it?"

"He went down into the village that same night, while the others were deep in slumber. He sent a telegram from the office where the French officer had read the government proclamation."

"Ah, ah, it makes one sick with anger! And he was pardoned?"

"Absolutely. He returned to where men live; and we—we went back into a sepulchre."

"And the poet?"

"Died on the journey—but he would have died in any case."

The Countess pressed her forehead. "It is almost too much to hear," she said.

"It has moved you?"

"You see!"

"I am glad of that—very glad."

"Why?"

"Because I want to ask you a question—a very important question," Lionzac answered in a deep, somber voice.

The blare of a steamer's siren on the river drew his gaze toward the window. A wisp of fog was over the water, where the red lamp of a port light glimmered; and on the farther shore an electric sign, above a big warehouse, burned like an enormous string of jewels on a wire.

At that moment the orchestra, which had been tuning for half a minute, commenced its seventh number.

"*Papillons d'Amour,*" murmured Lionzac, taking up the program for the second time. For some reason it seemed to interest him profoundly. "The next number is interesting," he went on reflectively. "They give good music here. It is that *Polonaise Militaire* which opens with a single crash, a blast of music from all the instruments at once. It is rather testing to nerves that are not perfectly sound, that abrupt blare. Are your nerves good, my dear Count?"

Count Basil leaned forward to drop the ash from his cigar.

"One might do almost anything and not be noticed in that coming commotion of sound," continued Lionzac, pondering. "Why, I do not suppose that *even the discharge of a pistol* would be heard if the shot were fired at the very moment of that crashing chord."

Count Basil turned his cigar round and round in his fingers.

"And this so important question?" reminded Philistrina gently.

"Ah, that. I am coming to it. The five of us were recaptured, as I told you. When the cup of freedom—the most precious of wine—was almost at our lips, that one of whom I have spoken, to make the situation perfectly safe for himself, betrayed his comrades. Bear in mind, I beg of you, the agony of disappointment that it meant to us. We had endured so much, and all in vain—worse than in vain. That brave French officer, who was assumed to be chiefly responsible for our luckless attempt at escape, had his sentence of exile increased to twenty years. He is there still, in that living grave.

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When he comes out of it the rose of his youth will have utterly withered.

"For thirteen years I toiled in the abyss. What should have been the best days of my life were eaten by a monstrous punishment. I have no intention of lacerating your feelings by any account of my sufferings. I ask you only to remember that I endured them, and that they were all but intolerable.

"Now comes my question. It is this—should that vow, which we solemnly pledged, be pushed to its last extreme? Consider well before you answer."

"It should be fulfilled to the last extreme, yes," said the Countess Basil, without the least hesitation.

"You reply very quickly."

"No, for I anticipated your question."

"I see. I must explain that I attach great value to your expression of opinion."

"So much so that life or death for this guilty man hangs on my word? Is that what you mean?"

"I do not go quite as far as that. For one thing, I was not the first to return. The student of medicine left three years ago. It was his duty to execute sentence."

"And he failed?"

"Apparently. Perhaps he forgot; perhaps his courage died in imprisonment. But I have not forgotten, and I shall have my revenge."

"Then why did you request my opinion?"

"I wanted to know what a woman thought about it. You will agree with me, Count, that your wife's outlook in such a matter, and her verdict, carry great weight."

Count Basil drew a silk handkerchief across his forehead.

"You find this room overheated?" smiled Lionzac.

"It is insufferably hot," muttered the other.

"And yet you are looking quite pale. Ah, that is the end of the *Papillions*."

The melody had been executed with considerable éclat, and it was rewarded with applause. As the conductor turned this and that way in acknowledgment, he perceived the Countess Basil, and a slight smile of recognition stirred his lips. Lionzac noticed this.

"That fellow takes liberties," he said coldly.

"Oh, he is a very popular musician," excused Philistrina.

"I should like to punch his nose, but that would create an undesirable sensation, and then we should not get the *Polonaise*. I must tell you that I had a peep at tonight's program and knew what was to be played. It was this impending *Polonaise* which helped to draw me. Count, you must be prepared for the preliminary crash of the instruments. I warn you because I fear your nerves are rather tightly strung tonight."

As he spoke these words, Lionzac slipped his right hand into a

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pocket and as unobtrusively drew it out again. He stretched his left arm negligently on the table, but his other arm hung down out of sight. The table cloth stirred a trifle, as if his unseen hand was lifting the edge.

Count Basil, who noticed this detail, stiffened in his chair. His bloodless cheeks seemed pasted with a gray ash, and his haggard eyes stared fixedly, as if he was imagining something that gripped his heart. He made a feeble effort to get up, but he seemed half paralyzed.

"I did not think you cared for loud music," said Philistrina.

"Perhaps not, but the crash is only a prelude to softer strains."

"To return to our more interesting subject," suggested Philistrina, "before you can think of your revenge—which I admit you have a perfect right to claim—it is necessary, of course, for you to find the victim."

"I have found him," said Lionzac.

"Indeed?"

"Indeed!"

"And where—" Philistrina broke off and beckoned to a waiter. "And where did you find that scoundrel?" She took a visiting card from a silk bag at her side and wrote a penciled line. "I hope not in this country, my friend?"

She handed the card to the waiter, who glanced at it, bowed, and retired.

"Why not?" asked Lionzac, who now kept his eyes, tranquil and cold, fixed on Count Basil.

"Because here, in England, you cannot challenge him to a duel. That is evident."

"Perfectly; but I recognize no necessity for a personal encounter on the field of honor."

"You would kill him in cold blood?"

"I shall kill him."

"But the consequences—"

"They are on the other side of my revenge. I shall face them. Ah, I think they are getting ready to play the *Polonaise*. Such a crash! As I said, the noise would drown even a pistol shot."

Count Basil leaned back in his chair, his head and shoulders sagging forward. His arms hung limply. He was on the verge of swooning.

"At any rate, my friend, you are a brave man," said Philistrina, with a keen look of admiration.

"How so?"

"Only a brave man could pursue such a purpose to such a conclusion."

"Only a foully wronged man could. May I ask, now that you see I am determined to kill the informer, if you would prefer to retract your judgment?"

"By no means. He deserves death. I suppose I must not ask where he is, and his name?"

"You will know—very soon."

"Ah! So you expect to act quickly?"

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"Very quickly."

From the verge of a swoon Count Basil suddenly came back to reality. Where was he? He was on the sloping edge of a precipice, and the wind from the abyss below, as from a sepulchre that yawned for him, blew up over his face.

"They are about to strike up," said Lionzac, a light passing across his eyes.

The conductor was on his feet. He tapped his music stand with his baton. He lifted his arm. He felt all eyes upon him; then he brought down the baton slowly, sweepingly.

The softest murmur of music rose from the strings—a hushed and plaintive cry. It was the *Berceuse* of Chopin.

Lionzac looked up. All at once his face had become pallid with fury. His powerful jaws snapped together. Whatever it was he had in his right hand, he thrust it into his pocket with a savage gesture.

"That is not the *Polonaise*!" he snarled.

"It is the beautiful *Slumber Song* of Chopin," said Philistrina calmly. "They are playing it by special request."

"Whose?" demanded Lionzac.

"Mine. I sent a card just now by the waiter."

"*You?*"

"I."

Lionzac sprang to his feet. With a strong effort he grappled with his passion.

"Then you—guessed—"

"Pardon, I knew."

Lionzac bowed, turned sharply, and walked from the place.

A long time passed—fully five minutes. Count Basil raised his drooping shoulders and a little color crept back into his cheeks. He glanced at his wife, who was looking straight in front of her, a deep frown across her pale forehead.

"How did you know, Philistrina?" he murmured.

"He had cold death in his eyes," she replied, without turning her head. "I missed not a movement, not a glance, not an inflection of his voice. I condemned you—because you deserved it, and because nothing I could have said would have swerved him from his purpose. He had an automatic pistol. He would have shot you from under the table, the flame unseen, the report unheard."

She broke off, the hardness of her expression suddenly eased by a hysterical spasm. "I played to save you," she added. "And more—to save him!"

There was another long silence, and then Count Basil spoke again, in a cowed and whimpering voice, "Tell me, Philistrina, what do you think of me?"

Philistrina threw up her chin. A terrible little laugh rasped her soft throat.

"What do I think of you? Ah, the good God, what do I think of you?"

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Another case for Richard Verner, heuristician—with a clue that is brand-new to your Editors. And it's a beauty—a whole detective novel could have hinged on it!

THE PROBLEM SOLVER AND THE BURNED LETTER

by CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

THE GRAVEL CRUNCHED AND THE leaves rustled in the tall trees that lined the private drive. Richard Verner guided his car past the expanse of close-clipped lawn that swept on and on from the gate and the brass plate lettered *Frank G. Margate.*

Seated beside him in the front seat of the car was the younger of Frank G. Margate's two sons. Charles Margate, a short well-dressed man in his early fifties, glanced out the window as a small wooden sign saying *Service Road* came into view. "Keep to the right here, Mr. Verner. The house is up ahead."

A white-brick mansion, with a white-pillared entrance, loomed through the trees as the drive curved to the right. The building was three stories high, with large wings thrust out at both ends, and a line of tall evergreens that blocked the view past the nearer, or western, wing.

Verner slowed the car. "Your father's office isn't in the nearer wing, Mr. Margate?"

"No, that's the servants' quarters. They have the day off, so I'm particularly anxious that we be here now. Father's office, or study, as he calls it, is at the far end of the house, at the back of the east wing."

Verner pressed lightly on the accelerator. As the car rolled down the drive, he thought for a moment of Charles Margate's problem, as Margate had explained it that morning.

"Mr. Verner, I am being systematically worked into a false and dangerous position by my older brother, Bertram. As I told you, Bertram is comptroller of my father's company, Margate Mills. I am vice-president in charge of manufacturing. My father, Frank Margate, founded the business, built it up, and it seemed natural for Bert and me to go into it. I wish now that I'd gone into something else—anything else—but that's neither here nor there. About six months ago Bert suggested that Father, who is getting well along in years, be eased out. I didn't agree, and I'm afraid we had quite a violent scene over it."

Verner said, "Excuse me, Mr.

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Margate, but how old is your father?"

"I'm fifty-four, Mr. Verner. Bert is fifty-six. Father is eighty-two. But he's in good health, and nothing will put him out of control of the company except sheer incapacity. Bert insisted it was time we took over. In fact, that would mean Bert would run the company. I'd rather work for Father, though believe me, that's no bed of roses. Recently, I've learned that Bert has been cleverly criticizing my work to Father, and frankly I'm worried. Any executive of the company can now testify that there have been bitter clashes between Father and me, while he and Bert have apparently gotten along quite well lately."

Verner frowned. "You're afraid you'll lose your position?"

"I'm afraid something will happen to Father, and that when it happens I'll be suspected. Bert spoke pretty strongly while we were arguing. He said, 'Will he never step aside? Look at us, Charlie! We're practically old men. We've lost our chance to be independent, and where are we? It's *still* Frank G. Margate, President! Maybe when I'm seventy and you're sixty-eight, we'll *still* be getting these little homely lectures from the great Frank Margate, President! Well, I've waited long enough!'"

"Your brother wants to control the company?"

"He does. At the least he wants some visible sign that he *will* control the company. Over twenty years ago I was vice-president in charge of manufacturing and Bert was comptroller. Since then there's been no change. It was tacitly understood that when the time came, Father would move up to Chairman of the Board, and one of us, probably Bert, would become president, while the other became executive vice-president. This hasn't happened. Meanwhile, Father keeps a very tight grip on the family investments. Bert and I work on salary, and live as moderately well-to-do executives. Father is extremely rich. No doubt he tells himself that what he has will be all ours some day. But I'm afraid Bert has decided that 'someday' will never come."

Now, as the car rolled along the drive, Verner said, "You want me to try to get some line on exactly what plot your brother has in mind?"

Charles Margate nodded. "We can't hope to unravel it in one afternoon. But there's got to be a start. If you can get any clue at all, it will be a help."

"Won't your father resent me as an outsider?"

"No. I'll vouch for you, and it will be all right. He likes to meet new people. You'll have to expect that he'll show you all over the place, and I'm afraid you'll be worn out before that's through. But I'm equally certain that Bert will stick close to you, out of suspicion."

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Verner smiled. "At any rate I'll meet the two men."

"Yes. We've got to start somewhere, Mr. Verner. I just don't like this situation. It's dangerous."

They rounded the last curve of the drive and were now traveling parallel with the front of the house. The drive widened here, to allow room for cars to park near the door. Farther ahead, partly hidden by tall shrubbery, was a separate graveled parking space.

"That's Father's own parking place," said Charles Margate. "A walk leads straight back from there to his study. When he has men from the plant out here, or other people strictly on business, they park there. Stop right here, Mr. Verner, and we'll walk to the study."

Verner pulled to the side, shut off the engine, and got out. Now he could see past the tall shrubs. Two cars were parked in the space ahead. One was a new deep-blue hardtop, highly polished. The other was a police car.

Verner stood motionless. He could still hear only the rustle of the leaves overhead. But there was a faint scent in the air.

Charles Margate got out and shut the car door. The slam sounded loud in the stillness.

Verner sniffed once sharply, then sniffed again.

Now he recognized the faint odor.

Kerosene.

Charles Margate glanced uneasily at Verner, who looked around quickly.

The breeze came from the north, and now there was another faint scent, like that of hot metal.

Suddenly the front window of the west wing lit up in a reddish glow, that showed almost at once in the next window, and then in the next.

Verner opened the car door. "Get in! Quick!"

Charles Margate hesitated in confusion.

Verner turned the ignition key. The engine caught with a roar.

"Get in!"

Margate got in, then tensed. "Father—"

Verner pressed down the gas pedal. With a spray of gravel the car shot ahead, across the edge of the drive onto the walk and the lawn, past the two parked cars. He spun the wheel, rounded the eastern corner of the house, and then they were at the rear of the mansion, where a long flagstone terrace ran the full length of the house. At this side the terrace ran around the corner, almost to the line of shrubbery. In this wall, looking out on the back terrace, were two windows and a door.

"Your father's study?"

"Yes."

The door opened and a grim-faced man, helped by a uniformed policeman, was carrying out a large white-haired man, his body stiff and unnatural.

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With an inarticulate cry Charles Margate jumped out of the car.

Verner got out, looked around sharply, then ran across the terrace and through the door into the elder Margate's study.

Ahead of him was a large desk, facing the rear door, and on the desk was a standard-sized typewriter. Nearby was a wastebasket, crammed nearly full with crumpled typing paper. On the floor nearby lay a small square typewriter-ribbon box. There were several filing cases below windows in the north wall of the room; a closed door and book shelves filled the west wall; in the east wall was a fireplace, where a police officer crouched, gently working a piece of fragile burned paper into a large Manila envelope. In the corner to one side of the fireplace was an open safe. Along the remaining wall was a leather sofa and two armchairs. Near the middle of the floor was a large brownish stain.

From the main part of the house came a gathering roar. Underfoot, the floor began to tremble.

Verner bent briefly and intently over the desk, then stepped around to the other side. He was acutely conscious that the evidence was about to be destroyed before his eyes. Then a second police officer burst into the room, shouting, "Get out! The whole place is on fire!"

The first policeman went out, carefully carrying his Manila envelope. The second officer glanced quickly around, stepped to the safe, pulled out a thick bundle of papers, and ran outside. Verner, half choked in the smoke that now swirled in through the open door, picked up the wastebasket and raced out across the terrace onto the clipped green lawn.

A wave of heat hit him, and then he was at the car. He slid inside, swung the car in a wide circle, and looked back at the mansion.

Nearly every window in the lower two floors was alight. From some opening in the roof a long tongue of flame climbed into the sky.

Verner spun the car farther around and drove back onto the graveled drive. Ahead of him the two other cars now rolled down the drive away from the house. When they stopped, Verner parked about twenty feet from the police car.

Inside the police car one officer was talking on the radio. The other was outside, his face tinged pink by the fire; he was shaking his head to the two well-dressed men who stood with tense faces to one side.

"—all we could do," the policeman was saying. "There just wasn't any time."

The shorter of the two men was Charles Margate, Verner's client. The taller must be Bertram Margate, Charles's older brother, who now said angrily, "I don't care what it costs, or who suffers. Whoever is responsible for this is going to pay for it."

Verner studied the brothers'

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faces, then said in an apologetic tone, "Officer—"

The policeman turned. He looked intelligent, but baffled.

Charles Margate glanced warningly at Verner. His brother, Bertram, said sharply. "Who the devil is that?"

Charles said, "A friend of mine, Bert. He drove out with me to see Father."

Verner said, his voice carefully and intentionally apologetic, "Odd what a person will do in an emergency. I picked up the wastebasket and saved *it* from the fire."

Charles Margate looked disappointed.

The police officer shrugged. "Bring it over. You never know—it might help."

Bertram Margate gave a slight but perceptible start. For an instant his eyes seemed to glitter. Then he relaxed. "We all make mistakes."

Verner glanced at the policeman. "You'd better come with me. We'll have to check under the seats to be sure nothing has fallen under them from the wastebasket."

Once they reached his car, out of hearing of the two brothers, Verner said quietly, "You were picking something out of the fireplace. Was it the ashes of a letter?"

The policeman looked at him intently. "What do you know about it?"

"The typewriter was out on the desk. It's natural to think that Frank Margate had typed something. But there was no paper in the typewriter or on the desk."

"Keep talking."

Verner put his hand in his pocket, took out a small, square flat object, and put it in the policeman's hand. "Who first noticed the ashes in the fireplace?"

The policeman stared at his hand, hesitated only a fraction of a second. "Bertram Margate."

Verner nodded thoughtfully. He and the policeman exchanged a few more words, then the officer carried the wastebasket back to the police car in the glow of the burning house.

The next day Verner was at the police station, along with Charles and Bertram Margate, the policemen who'd been at the scene, and a chunky police Lieutenant who spoke politely to Verner's client.

"Mr. Margate, you realize that you're entitled to be represented by your lawyer?"

"Yes," said Charles Margate shortly. "But I don't need a lawyer. I want to know what you've found out."

"I'm sorry to say, Mr. Margate, that the wastebasket contained half a dozen unfinished letters—some mere openings—all addressed to Roger Pohl, your father's lawyer."

Charles Margate frowned. "What about it?"

The Lieutenant's voice grew softer. "Apparently it was a difficult letter for your father to write."

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Charles Margate looked at him steadily.

The Lieutenant went on, "In the fireplace there was a burned typewritten letter. Many people believe, Mr. Margate, that if a letter is burned, the letter is completely destroyed. Not necessarily. If the ashes are not broken up, it may still be possible to reconstruct the letter. Type can often be read clearly, black against the gray of the ash, the letters shrunken but legible. I'm sorry to say, Mr. Margate, that the letter in the fireplace contained instructions to Mr. Pohl to disinherit you, as your father had discovered that you'd been tampering with company records in an attempt to shift the blame for stealing company funds onto your brother, Bertram."

Charles shut his eyes.

Bertram, tall and well-groomed, said in a voice filled with astonishment, "Good God, Charles! Why didn't you come to me?"

Charles opened his eyes and looked directly at Verner. Then he drew a deep slow breath and turned to the Lieutenant. "Yes. Now I will need a lawyer."

The Lieutenant said coolly, "You might be interested to know that the crumpled unfinished letters in the wastebasket tie in perfectly with the contents of the burned letter."

Charles Margate thrust out his jaw and said nothing.

In another room a phone began to ring; it stopped when someone answered.

A moment later a detective looked in. "A lawyer named Pohl is on the line, Lieutenant. He wants to speak to you personally."

The Lieutenant excused himself.

There was silence in the room after he left, and his voice could be heard outside: "Yes, Mr. Pohl . . . Yes . . . Wait a minute, now. Could you read me that again? . . . Yes, I *see*. When was it postmarked? . . . You'll vouch for the signature? . . . Yes, you're right. It's like a dead hand striking from the grave . . . No, we had the wrong man, Mr. Pohl. Just photostat it and the envelope, put the photostats in your office safe, then bring the originals down here right away. It makes an open-and-shut case . . . Yes, Mr. Pohl. We can take him into custody at once."

Charles Margate's eyes were wide.

The two policemen, apparently intent on the voice from the other room, were turned partly away, listening.

Abruptly Bertram Margate sucked in his breath, leaned forward, and jerked the revolver from the nearest officer's holster.

"Don't move. I've killed once and if I have to, I'll kill again." He glanced at his brother. "Damn him, Charlie, he never *did* step aside. All I wanted was to be independent. That's why I took the money. It would never hurt him, it would

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have been mine anyway some day, but damn him, he was going to cut me off!"

Abruptly he whirled, and moving with incredible speed was out the door. Instantly there was the sound of a struggle, a click, and a heavy crash. Then the Lieutenant stepped back in, smiled at Verner, and turned to Charles Margate.

"Mr. Margate, you don't need a lawyer when you've got this fellow —" he nodded toward Verner— "You can leave anytime. You're free."

Charles Margate, seated in the client's chair in Richard Verner's office, said in bafflement, "Mr. Verner, I think my brother's mind has been warped for the past few months. But I have to admit, the only flaw I can see in his plan was the timing. He could *set* the fire, in the hope that the police would have just enough time to pick up the clues he'd left for them. But he couldn't be sure the fire wouldn't burn too fast. Still that's the only flaw I can see. But this letter Mr. Pohl received from Father—why, Father would never have revealed such a family scandal, even to his lawyer—not until he had decided exactly what to do. And to be certain of that he would have to see Bert first. He might *write* the letter —but it would remain unmailed till he'd spoken to Bert. And I know he hadn't spoken to Bert about this before the day of the fire. Mr. Verner, *Father never mailed that letter to Pohl.*"

Verner nodded. "However, he did *write* it."

"But how did it reach Pohl?"

"When I went into your father's office, there was a small square typewriter-ribbon box on the floor by the desk. I looked at the typewriter, and saw that a fresh ribbon had very recently been put in it."

Margate looked puzzled.

Verner said, "Each time a key, any letter or punctuation mark, was struck on the typewriter, *it left its imprint on that fresh ribbon.*"

Margate sat up. "You mean, by studying the ribbon, you could reconstruct the letter?"

"Exactly—and we're lucky the fire left the ribbon in the typewriter intact. Now, the first thing typed on the fresh ribbon was a letter accusing your brother. That was followed by the various openings found in the wastebasket, and finally by the finished letter accusing you—the one burned in the fireplace but only partially destroyed. All the letters, incidentally, had the same date."

"How could you tell which letter was genuine?—that is, written by Father."

"People rarely put a fresh ribbon in a typewriter and then put the typewriter away. Usually they put the fresh ribbon in just before typing something, and that something naturally appears *first* on the new

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ribbon. So whoever put in the new ribbon also typed that first letter—which accused your brother. Now, would someone else be likely to put a fresh ribbon in your father's typewriter while he was alive?"

"No. Father would have noticed the fresh ribbon the next time he used it, and known that someone else had been using his typewriter."

"Then, you see, we have to conclude either that the murder had already taken place—in which case we'd have *two* sets of fake letters—or that the first letter was typed by your father. As for the later letters, they could only be genuinely your father's if he had changed his mind completely in a very short time—maybe minutes. And then we have to explain all those later unfinished letters in the wastebasket. Having already written a complete letter disinheriting your brother, why should your father have any difficulty whatever phrasing the opening of an identical letter disinheriting you instead?

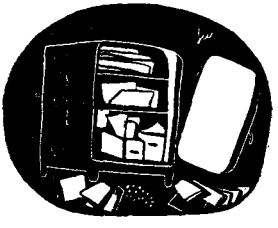
"The only explanation that covers all the facts is that the first letter is the genuine one, and the others are false. In that case *you* are innocent and *your brother* is guilty. That solution led the police to set up their trap."

Charles Margate shook his head. "It would have been too bad if Father hadn't changed ribbons, if his letter had been typed on old ribbon. Or if you hadn't noticed that this one was brand-new."

Verner nodded. "Or if your brother had realized it. But he didn't. So when he typed that letter to disinherit you, he condemned himself."

Charles Margate looked at Verner quizzically. "What is it you call yourself? Not a crime consultant or a detective, but a—"

"Heuristician." Verner smiled. "A problem solver."



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the *NEWEST* police procedural by

LAWRENCE TREAT

Mitch Taylor of the Homicide Squad had a genius (there's no other word for it) for getting involved in cases that really weren't his assignments. Of course, Mitch always had an angle, and that might account for it. If he wanted a free evening at the swank Blue Room to celebrate his and Amy's wedding anniversary—well, as they say, a favor gets a favor . . . and that's how Mitch got up to his ears in the Hotel Jackson robbery, which turned out to be an even more complicated heist than it first looked . . .

P AS IN PAYOFF

by LAWRENCE TREAT

THEY'D HAD THIS ROBBERY OVER at the Hotel Jackson last week. A couple of thugs had come in around midnight and mauled the night clerk and taken the keys to the safe and cleaned it out. What with those Texas oilmen in town checking their overweight wallets for the night, the job had added up to quite a haul.

The Homicide Squad, which handled all crimes against the person, hadn't got anywhere. One of the heist men had worn a mask, and the description the clerk gave of the other one was so vague you wondered which side of the fence he was sitting on. Still, they hadn't been able to pin a thing on him.

Mitch Taylor wasn't carrying the case; he'd been investigating a restaurant holdup the last couple of days, but he'd worked on the Jackson thing along with the rest of the squad. So it was perfectly natural for him to stop in at the hotel and talk things over with Pat McQuade, the hotel dick, who was a friend of Mitch's.

Well, maybe not exactly a friend, but Mitch had seen him around. Mitch had happened to notice a report from the Third Precinct, where the Jackson was located, that some minor pilfering had been going on in the hotel. What it sized up to in Mitch's mind was, why shouldn't he drop around and see if he could give Pat a little help?

Mitch didn't figure he could do anything to write home about, but on the other hand when you did

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somebody a favor he might want to do a little something in return. Like arranging to have you and your wife as guests of the management some evening. Say in the swank Blue Room, where they had that floor show he'd heard so much about. Say next Wednesday, which was his wedding anniversary and which he and Amy always made something special out of.

Mitch got to the hotel a little before lunch, and from the lineup at the cashier's window you'd think they were paying out instead of taking in. The rest of the big colonnaded lobby was jammed full, too. People sitting there waiting for appointments, people that had come in early and were waiting to pick up their reservations, people that maybe had nothing to do except sit, because the chairs were for free, and pretty comfortable, at that.

The Hotel Jackson was big business all right, and Pat had two guys working for him and he needed them both. Mitch spotted one of them fussing around a pile of baggage. Name of Green. He was new here and just married, and he'd been off duty and paying strict attention to his homework when the safe robbery had taken place. And from the way Green was strutting around now, practically advertising what he was—a house dick—Mitch didn't think the guy had much of a future in hotels.

Right now, nobody would have picked Mitch out as a cop. Not tall enough. And besides, he'd put away that chesty stance of his, had a hat stuck over the stiff sprouts of his hair, and somehow you just didn't notice his face. He'd been on a dead-end lead all morning, and he was still acting like he was nobody.

At the rear of the lobby he knocked on the door of Pat's office and Pat's deep growl told him to come in. Pat, a big hippo of a guy built like a pair of bellows on top of an anvil, stuck out a big paw and shook hands with Mitch.

"Sit down and take a load off your feet," Pat said. "What's on your mind? Anything new on the heist?"

"Nothing much," Mitch said. "We're still plugging away. I hear you got some other problems."

Pat nodded. He folded up his penknife—it was one of those fancy ones with a bunch of attachments, and he'd been using it to unscrew something on a box where he kept a couple of decks of cards. He picked up one of the cards and skidded it across the room and square into the wastepaper basket. The next few minutes while he was talking, he did it a couple more times and he made a goal every try, which was maybe one of the reasons why he had all these problems.

"Yeah," Pat said. "It looks like somebody got hold of some of the room keys, and he walks into a place and takes a little of this and a little of that. The floor maids don't notice him. Green, he's still wet be-

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hind the ears, and Flanagan, that's my other man, all he's good for is to tell the guests to pipe down when they're making too much noise. And he usually ends up taking a drink and joining the party."

"Any leads?" Mitch asked.

"Well, you know how it is. You get a feeling sometimes. This guy in eight-oh-seven—nothing I can put my finger on, except he's been here a couple of times before and always stays on the eighth, and that's where a lot of the trouble is."

"Got his file card?" Mitch said.

Pat fished in a desk drawer and brought out a guest reservation. It read *Joseph Jannis, Scranton, Pa.*

"What's the precinct doing about it?" Mitch asked. He wasn't going to stick his neck out and butt into a case that belonged to the local precinct. "They're handling this, aren't they?"

Pat snorted. "Them!" he said. "Otero's in charge, and he's got it in for me. I ask for help, and he sends around some flatfoot that smokes a cigar and hides behind a newspaper. He might as well wear a uniform."

"Jannis," Mitch said thoughtfully. "No reason why I couldn't check with the Scranton department and find out if they got anything on him."

"Would you do that little thing?" Pat said. "Because I don't mind telling you my job's on the line. The management's sore, they blame me for this, but every time I sit out in the lobby, nothing happens. I got a hunch that whoever it is spots me, and lays low."

"Maybe I could stake it out for a little while. Just kind of hang around and see if I notice anything."

Pat brightened up. "Mitch, I won't forget this. Anything I can do for you, just name it."

"I don't want anything in particular," Mitch said mildly. "Just glad to help you out."

"Sure, but a favor gets a favor. Like I said, you name it."

"Well," Mitch said making like he was thinking it over, "how's the Blue Room these days? Good show?"

"The best, and any time you want to spend an evening there I'll fix it up. On the house. Just tell me when."

"Maybe next Wednesday," Mitch said. "I wouldn't want to horn in on the week-end traffic. Next Wednesday's fine. Make it a table for four, huh?"

Pat made a note on his pad, and Mitch stood up. "I better go see what's cooking," Mitch said. "Anything that comes up, I'll be in touch."

With his mission accomplished, he wandered around the lobby a little, like he was lost, and ended up in a chair near the front desk. He thought of Amy and what she'd say when he told her about the Blue Room. She'd glow like a Christmas tree and go haul out those glad rags

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of hers. And when Amy was dressed up, you'd think she just stepped off the Paris plane.

Thinking about her, Mitch felt good and he half closed his eyes, dreamy-like, but he didn't miss a thing. You develop a sort of sixth sense. Nothing you can put your finger on, but ten or fifteen people go by and you don't even see them, and suddenly you find yourself watching somebody like he had a sign on him saying he was on the prowl.

Which wasn't exactly why he noticed the tall girl with long light hair and a build like strung taffy, and strung nice. The reason Mitch noticed her had nothing to do with his line of work. And then again, maybe it had.

Anyhow, he watched her leave her key at the desk and then move off like she had a bunch of photographers taking pictures of her, which she didn't. And somehow it was in the back of Mitch's mind that her room number would be on the eighth floor. So he waited for the clerk to pick up her key and hang it in front of her box.

It was Number 1012. Tenth floor.

Green went by, heading for the coffee room and walking like he had three stars on each shoulder and was afraid they'd drop off. He didn't see Mitch, and Mitch didn't feel insulted about it, either.

Around three or four minutes later a big blond guy who walked on the balls of his feet and looked like an athlete came up to the desk and asked for a key.

"Ten-twelve," he said confidently.

He could have been her husband, but Mitch was betting the other way. This was an old trick. You hang around the desk until you see somebody who's well-dressed and looks loaded, and you watch where he (only this time it was a she) leaves his key, and you keep watching until you see where the clerk hangs it up.

You wait long enough to make sure the person doesn't come back on account he forgot something, and then you go and ask for that key. Upstairs you may have a little problem getting past the floor maid without her remembering you, but there are plenty of ways of handling that. For instance, before you go up you get her on the phone and invent an errand to pull her away from her desk for a few minutes.

After that it's duck soup. You use the key, you open the door, you go in and take what you want, and then you come downstairs and drop off the key, and who's going to remember anything? Not a clerk who's handing out a few hundred keys and has ten other things to take care of.

Mitch decided to run the show by himself and turn this blond athlete over to Pat after making the pinch himself. What Mitch would do was, he'd wait outside the room until this sprinter or miler or whatever

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he was came out, and then Mitch would nab him with the goods.

On the way up in the elevator Mitch told himself he'd just about earned that dinner in the Blue Room already. He stepped out on the tenth and saw the sign pointing to where 1012 was. The floor maid was busy with some laundry, so Mitch went down the long corridor and turned a corner.

Room 1012 was in the old part of the hotel and still had an old-fashioned door with a keyhole, which was fine with Mitch. He got down on his knees, and he could see pretty much all he wanted.

Here was this pole vaulter or broad jumper bending down over an open suitcase and rummaging inside. He had the green stuff in his hands, and Mitch wondered what the hell a dame was doing with all those bills in her bag. Then this hurdler or whatever turned a little and Mitch couldn't see what he was doing, except he still had hold of the green stuff and seemed to like it.

Then it happened. The rest of the Homicide Squad could usually count on a break now and then, but not Mitch. When the wrong thing happened, Mitch was tagged. So this time a door opened right opposite him and this wise guy came out. He saw Mitch on his knees and peeking through a keyhole. The guy probably figured he'd grab Mitch and bring him down to the management, and the guy would get thanked and get his name in the paper and brag about it for the rest of his life.

Anyhow, the guy was all set to be a hero and a VIP and whatever else his peanut of a mind dreamed about. By the time the ruckus was over, this discus thrower or shot putter inside would drop whatever he'd taken and latch onto some kind of an explanation, and that would be it.

The guy in the hall yelled out. "What do you think you're doing? Get up before I—"

Mitch bounced to his feet and yanked back his coat so that his gun showed, and at the same time he dipped his hand in his pocket and took out his badge. "Get going," he said crisply.

"Don't pull that," the guy said. "You can't peep through keyholes and then order me around. Come on downstairs to the manager."

The guy was screaming loud enough for that track-and-field man inside to hear every word, so Mitch rapped on the door and called out, "Police. Open up."

It was all he could do. Instead of waiting for this javelin thrower to walk into Mitch's arms with the evidence on him, Mitch had to bang on a door and announce himself. He still had a charge of illegal entry, but larceny? He could kiss that part of it goodbye.

What with the gun and the way Mitch went into action, this public-spirited big-shot do-gooder must

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have decided it wasn't safe to stay, so he hotfooted it down the corridor and around the corner and out of sight. And what he said and did after that was no concern of Mitch's. He'd missed his big play, and it was a good minute or so before this long-distance runner was ready to open the door. And naturally, as Mitch found out later, the decathlon champ didn't have the dough on him.

"What do you want?" he demanded, kind of snooty.

"Just come along," Mitch said. "This is a pinch."

"I think you're making a mistake," this big blond guy said. "I'm on Federal business. Take a look." And he pulled out an F.B.I. identification card.

It said Henry Saunders and it was genuine all right—a light blue card with a gray background and a whole bunch of seals on it.

Maybe it was the way Saunders spoke—like Mitch was a hunk of dirt you swept out of the way—or maybe Mitch was just sore at how things were going and was itching for a fight. Whatever the reason, he acted like a rookie who'd never heard of politicians or how you get a promotion or why you better butter up to Uncle Sam.

"Is this your room?" Mitch asked.

Saunders blinked. "What are you trying to pull?" he said.

"Not a thing," Mitch said. "Got a warrant for coming in here?"

"You know who I am," Saunders said, "so let's go downstairs and forget about this. Unless you want real trouble."

That did it. The wronger Mitch was, the stubborner he got. But here he'd started something, and if it meant swimming across the Atlantic on a pair of water wings, he'd finish it.

"You're under arrest," Mitch said quietly.

Saunders smiled real cute. "All right," he said, "If I'm under arrest, let's go. But I want to get away from here before you really spoil my play."

The result was that ten minutes later Mitch marched into headquarters with the F.B.I. man in tow, and went straight to Lieutenant Decker's office and handed over his prisoner.

"Federal Agent Henry Saunders," Mitch said stiffly. "I got him for illegal entry, and I saw him take money from a guest's suitcase at the Jackson. He put it back before I could make the arrest, but I witnessed the act." And Mitch gave the highlights of what had happened.

The Lieutenant, looking like a sort of long gray owl, swung around in his chair. It squeaked twice, slow and easy, which told Mitch that everything was smooth and that the Lieutenant was going to back Mitch to the hilt.

It went without saying, though, that Decker, being a shoofly, was responsible for good relations with all law enforcement agencies and

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had to watch his step. On the other hand they had to play ball, too, and here on his home field Decker made up the ground rules, and then some.

Mitch could tell right off that the Lieutenant was 'way ahead of him and had caught on to something. So when the Lieutenant started buttering up Saunders and making it look like he was right and Mitch was all wrong, Mitch wasn't worried. He just stayed on the sidelines and watched Decker pitch. And he came in with a real sweet curve.

"I suppose," he said to Saunders, "that you were on routine work, nothing important enough to check with us." He seemed friendly, like he was offering Saunders an easy way out. "Just none of our business."

Saunders fell for it. "That's right," he said.

"Nothing to do with the Jackson robbery last week?"

Saunders saw the trap then. He'd swung and he'd missed, and he looked a little unhappy. "I was on a confidential assignment," he said.

"Didn't have anything to do with this robbery of ours, did it?"

"That's what I wanted to find out," Saunders said, ducking away.

"Who is this woman in ten-twelve?"

"Jenny Moran," Saunders said. He was sure of himself now, and he went ahead easily. "She's the girl friend of Tommy-Gun Whelan, a former bank robber. He broke parole and we're looking for him. We figured we could get him through Jenny."

"I don't recall getting a wanted sheet on him. Is he still robbing banks?"

"Not that we know of."

"What then?" Decker demanded, and that put Saunders on the spot.

He was sweating, and he tried to duck away from the fast ball. "I think you'd better check with my boss," he said.

"I'm asking *you*," Decker said, which made it no balls and two strikes. "You know what the score is, don't you?"

Saunders knew all right. If Decker went through with the illegal entry charge, Saunders would be fired. Out on his can. The F.B.I. doesn't like agents that dig themselves into a hole in the ground.

"I wanted to be sure of my background before contacting you," Saunders said, which was hogwash and he knew it and we knew it. Still, he had to give out now, and he did. "There was a hotel robbery in Buffalo and another one in Cleveland, and both of them had the same pattern as here—a night job, fast and well planned, with a full safe and no clues, except that Cleveland turned up Whelan's prints."

"You think he's through with bank robbery?" Decker said.

"Sure. It's a Federal offense, so he switched to something easier, like hotel safes. He's been doing nicely at it, too. Big hauls, and everything going like clockwork until we iden-

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tified that fingerprint. We think we can locate him through Jenny. I know her, and when we got a tip that she was going to check into the Jackson, under the name of Mrs. Ivy, I was sent to investigate."

"I see," Decker said, and then he threw his third strike. "Were you ordered to keep us in the dark about Whelan's involvement in the robbery here?"

"No, sir," Saunders said.

The Lieutenant leaned back and let the chair squeak. "No reason I can see to take this any further," he remarked. "We all make mistakes. So just hang around here for a while and make yourself comfortable."

"Yes, sir," Saunders said.

The Lieutenant had handled this okay, and it left Mitch feeling chipper. He had collared this F.B.I. high jumper for no good reason except the guy rubbed Mitch the wrong way, and now it turned out Mitch had made a real brainy play. They had the main facts, all they needed. Tommy-Gun Whelan and some sidekick had pulled the Jackson job, and Jenny was here with the dough and making contact.

Decker turned to Mitch. "Better go over to the hotel," he said. "I'll get hold of Balenky and tell him to meet you there, with a warrant. Once we have her and that wad of dough, we'll be on top." He shifted to Saunders and said, "You had a look at those bills. How much does she have?"

"Five grand," Saunders said. "I put it back where I found it—in a slit in the lining of her bag."

Mitch went straight over to the Hotel Jackson. There he stopped at the desk and saw that the key to 1012 had been picked up, which meant Jenny was in. With that keyhole in mind, Mitch went up. He figured it couldn't happen twice. This time nobody was going to step into the corridor just when Mitch got down on his knees. That kind of bad luck just didn't repeat itself. Not twice in the same day, not even to Mitch.

But it did.

He heard someone start out of a room farther down the corridor, and again Mitch did the only thing he could. He stood up and rapped on the door.

The woman coming down the hallway didn't pay any attention to Mitch. He got by with that much. But inside Room 1012 he heard a scurrying sound, the noise of a chair banging against a table, the thud of a heavy footstep. Then McQuade's voice spoke up.

"Who's there?"

"Pat?" Mitch said in surprise. "It's me—Mitch Taylor."

"Be right with you," McQuade answered, and a moment later he unlocked and opened the door, and Mitch stepped inside.

The taffy girl was there, her bag lying on the rack, and a bottle of whiskey and two glasses were on the table.

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"Have a drink, Mitch," Pat said. "This is Mrs. Ivy. She thinks somebody got into her room while she went out, and I was investigating."

"Somebody sure did," Mitch said. "I saw him. He used the old trick—wait for a key to be handed in and then come around a few minutes later and ask for it."

Pat turned to Jenny. "You were right," he said. Then to Mitch, "Did you get a line on him?"

"I followed him out, but—you know how these things are." Pat nodded, and Mitch added unhappily, "I lost him."

"Well, thanks for the try," Pat said. "Got a description?"

"Small dark guy," Mitch said. "Did he take anything, Mrs. Ivy?"

Jenny shook her head. "No, and that's what's so peculiar."

"You never know," Mitch said. "Some of these hotel crooks are kind of special, and that's one way we classify them. For instance, there's the type that just takes liquor and then there's the type that goes for cash or jewelry or credit cards. When they don't find their specialty, they leave. But they got different ways of going through a bag—sometimes they'll repack in certain special ways. Stuff like that. Mind if I look through your bag, Mrs. Ivy? It might give me a lead on this guy."

"Why should I mind?" she said, smiling. "Of course you can look."

Mitch opened the bag, shoved his hand down inside the lining, and felt around. Nothing.

He stepped back. "Just a shot in the dark," he said. But you didn't have to pull your brains apart to add up two and two. Here Jenny had been away from her room for maybe an hour. Before she'd left, she'd had five grand hidden in her bag. Now the green stuff was gone and she was sitting here having a friendly drink with McQuade.

So what you did, you added up two and two, and got—

The phone rang and Jenny answered it. She seemed a little nervous at first, but she relaxed and turned around. "For you, Mr. McQuade," she said. "Somebody named Green."

Pat took the phone, said hello and yeah a few times, then said, "Nice going. I'll be right down."

He waited a few seconds with his hand still resting on the cradled phone, and he grunted thoughtfully before he spoke to Mitch.

"Green caught the floor maid on the eighth going into one of the rooms. He got her cold, and she confessed the whole series of thefts. Now who'd have guessed *she* was responsible?"

"Green did," Mitch said, real innocent-like.

Pat shrugged it off. "Well, Mrs. Ivy," he said, "I've done all I can. I'd better be going downstairs now." He started lumbering off and was in front of the bathroom when Mitch spoke up.

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"Better stick around a while, Pat."

"What for?"

"You know what for," Mitch said, pulling out his gun. "You're under arrest, so better hand over the dough and come quiet."

Pat gasped, stuck his hand over his chest, and said, "I don't feel so good. Heart—I'd better—" He whirled and kind of staggered into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him. Mitch heard the lock click.

Jenny sat down suddenly, as if she was faint. "What did that mean?" she said. "What's happening?"

"You're under arrest, too," Mitch said. Businesslike, he moved forward and took out his handcuffs. Jenny submitted without fuss, but those bluish eyes of hers aimed at him like a pair of gun barrels head-on. Dames like her could get nasty, and he didn't feel safe until he had her cuffed to the radiator.

"I think you'll regret this," she said. "Exactly what are you accusing me of?"

Mitch sat down. He didn't have to worry about Jenny for a while, on account she and the radiator weren't going to interfere when Pat came out of the bathroom. And when Pat did, he was liable to make trouble. But with luck Balenky would get here first.

Mitch turned to Jenny. "Where's Whelan?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"McQuade'll spill everything," Mitch said. "He's been around long enough to know it's a good idea to play along with us. He'll admit the whole business if he thinks the D.A. will go easy on him."

"You're talking in riddles," Jenny said.

"No riddles," Mitch said, with a glance at the bathroom. "The heists went off too smooth. Buffalo, Cleveland, then here. They had to be inside jobs, with a clerk or the hotel detective lining things up. Here, Whelan made a deal with Pat, and Pat gave him the layout and picked a time when the safe would be worth going after. You came here to pay Pat his share, and you did it. He's got the dough on him right now. Where's Whelan?"

She didn't answer, but Mitch had a sinking feeling when he heard McQuade, who didn't smoke, strike a match in the bathroom.

When Ed Balenky knocked on the door, Mitch told him to come in. Balenky, chewing on a stale cigar butt, took a quick look at Mitch and a much longer one at Jenny.

"What cooks?" Balenky asked, deadpan.

"We're waiting for Pat McQuade to come out of the bathroom," Mitch said. He heard the toilet flush and he said, "It's going to be pretty soon now. He just got his payoff, and when I tried to collar him he ducked in there and locked himself in. Pretended he was sick, but he'll

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be okay when he comes out. Better be ready, Ed."

Balenky slid his gun out of its holster. "I'm ready," he said, and stood there waiting.

It took McQuade another minute or so before he appeared. He was rubbing his forehead and still putting on his heart act.

"I feel a little better now," he said. "Those attacks—"

Mitch signaled to Balenky. "Take him, Ed."

With two cops there and with their guns out, McQuade had sense enough to let Balenky snap on the bracelets, frisk him, and take his gun. But when Balenky counted up McQuade's cash it came to exactly $8.24—which was a long way from proving a payoff of five grand.

Mitch, pretty sure of what he'd find, went into the bathroom. He could smell burned paper, and there were some ashes and a smudge on the sink where Pat had lit the stuff before flushing it down the toilet. And whether there was enough evidence left to support a payoff charge was a tossup.

Mitch swung around and he could see McQuade standing there with a smirk on his face. What bothered Mitch most was, he'd followed Pat's thinking right along, so what was Pat crowing about if his five grand had just gone up in smoke and he was under arrest anyhow?

Then it hit Mitch.

No crook would give up on all that dough. The one thing a crook does is hang onto the green stuff no matter what—so couldn't Pat have faked the whole business? He'd probably put a match to a wad of paper, to fool the police, and then stuck the bills away somewhere, just temporary, and figured on coming back and getting them as soon as he was turned loose.

There aren't too many hiding places in a bathroom, so it was mostly a question of the toilet tank or the ventilator, or maybe a loose tile somewhere. Except when Mitch looked, he drew blank. No dough in the tank. No dough behind the ventilator. No loose tile.

Then he noticed the window was open, and he had the answer. The way Pat spent time chucking those cards across the room and smack into the wastepaper basket—if he could do that, why couldn't he heave a wad of bills out the window and hit a roof or a ledge somewhere?

So Mitch stuck his head out, but it was still no dice. He was looking ten floors down and straight into the street, with nothing in sight that a package could land on.

He stepped back. A breeze coming through the window was blowing onto the wash basin where some of those ashes were still lying. Because those ashes might be important, once Jub Freeman had them in the lab, Mitch started to close the window. To his annoyance the thing was stuck and he had to give

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it a couple of thumps and then yank with all his strength before he could get the window down.

He looked to see what the trouble was, and noticed that the hunk of wood covering the space where the sash weight went down was loose, as if it had been pulled out and hadn't been put back exactly right. And with the screws holding it sort of loose-looking, and with the slots gouged out and the paint on them chipped, it all added up to just one thing.

Now that the whammy was gone, Mitch felt pretty cocky as he came out of the bathroom. "Ed," he said, "would you fish in McQuade's pocket and get me that knife of his? I want to take a look at it."

McQuade gave a kind of jerk. He knew he was hooked and this time he wouldn't be able to squirm out of it. So all Mitch had to do was open up the screwdriver attachment, which still had a little paint on it, and then unscrew that piece of wood and pry it off. And sure enough, the dough was there—the whole wad, the five grand.

Which tied everything nice and neat, except Mitch had gone and outsmarted himself on that wedding celebration of his. Because Pat sure wasn't going to freeload him now, and Mitch couldn't go up to the management and ask for a favor. That would be strictly against regulations and could backfire plenty. So where was he?

He gave McQuade a dirty look, on account this was strictly his fault. Then Mitch remembered Green. If McQuade could get Mitch a free evening in the Blue Room, why couldn't Green swing it, too? A kid like that, it was just a matter of handling him right, of finding the right approach.

Mitch began thinking real hard.

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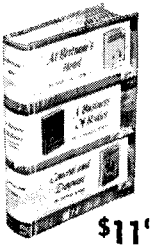

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